A Tightly Folded Valentine

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A Tightly Folded Valentine

by lasiczka

Summary

Hannibal is a cardiac surgeon at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. Will is a homicide detective in New Orleans. Will's injuries are more severe than just a stab wound in the shoulder. Hannibal brings him a heart.

Notes

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xoxo
łasiczka

Chapter 1

Will Graham gets stabbed. In another world, it would have only been once, a quick jab with a clean blade in the shoulder, and he would have gone down as the mugger ran into the alley. In another world, it would have ached, the slice of metal would have been so sharp that it severed nerves. His partner would have called 911 (pressing the keys perfectly) after applying pressure to the wound. He would have made a full recovery. He would quit work as a homicide detective in New Orleans and apply at Quantico. He would have the glossy scar tissue as a reminder that he can survive men who think they have the right to take things from the world.

Instead, Will gets stabbed in the stomach, the shoulder, the chest. The blade is old and jagged and rusty, and it burns like fire, like ice. His partner is screaming into her radio. He falls, hitting his head against the dirty alley wall, and unceremoniously begins to bleed out. His fingertips skim the puddle of blood, tracing invisible patterns. His breathing whistles. He suddenly can't hear anything except for that weak, high hiss. He feels dread, a vague impending worry. His eyes close. There is a knife still stuck in his chest.

The EMTs slice him open, an emergency thoracotomy to keep his heart pumping, and assess his head wound. They maintain manual systole as they race to the hospital, gripping his heart between blood slicked fingers. He goes into surgery as soon as he gets to the emergency room. His liver is slashed, his left lung is punctured, his intestines are leaking into his body. It is a miracle that he is breathing. It is a miracle that the stabbing was so near a level one trauma centre. It is a miracle that his pancreas isn't injured, that he's not in hypovolemic shock, that there is no peritonitis. It is a miracle that the pneumothorax is small, easily fixed with a chest tube.

There are conflicting opinions on what should be done about his head and his heart, which one to mend first, which one to monitor. The blade is deep in one ventricle, sealing the damage; stable, but more volatile with every moment. Permanent brain damage is the other concern. They decide to focus on the head trauma.

The consequences of that decision leave Will with a heart that doesn't quite work. He has persistent arrhythmias, and more concerningly, abnormal scar tissue formations. He is barely conscious, swimming through pain medication. Two days pass, during which he becomes markedly improved, before he collapses in bed in cardiac failure. He is put on an ECMO device, the blood oxygenating outside his body. Through the haze, Will watches as lines of syrupy red enter and exit his body, sloshing in the machine. He stays that way for nine days before it's obvious that the wound will not heal adequately. An LVAD isn't an option because of the risk of gastrointestinal bleeding. A pacemaker would strain his heart too much.

Will needs a heart transplant; everyone agrees on that, including him. He signs the forms with a shaky hand. Phone calls are made, waiting lists are edited, arguments about need and patients erupt, and finally a match is found. Another miracle for the detective, says the hospital gossip machine. Five days later, Hannibal Lecter, cardiac fellow at Johns Hopkins

Medical Centre, gets off a plane from Baltimore, Maryland, carrying Will Graham's new heart.

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"Can I see it?" mutters Will with a warm southern twang after Doctor Lecter introduces himself. "The heart in a box?" He can make his voice sound convincing, comforting, curious, when he wants to.

Doctor Lecter allows him the privilege. Will cannot be moved, so the heart is moved to him. It sits, ever-beating, bloody, in an organ care system which flushes it with nutrients and oxygen. The thump of it is heavy in Will's ears, warm and sickening, very very beautiful. The fist of muscle pulses rhythmically, the veins protruding, the pink of the flesh, the life of it. Will's left hand pulls at his hospital pajamas, finding his own broken heart, sinking his nails into his chest as though he could rip through. His head, constantly blurry from the pain medicine, clears and lifts. It is as though he is watching from six inches above himself. Neurological problems are common side effects from trauma, but he hasn't experienced much aside from this floating feeling.

"A fascinating little device, isn't it? Holding the most essential part of a human body outside of its confines. Nurtured, warmed. I feel as though I've brought you a valentine. Appropriate, I think, considering tomorrow's date."

Will scowls, but he feels oddly charmed. He has never liked Valentine's Day, in theory or in practice, but it's February, his surgery is scheduled for the 14th, and a doctor has brought him an impossible heart. Even seeing the thing as a patient, Will thinks, is probably against many rules.

The corner of Doctor Lecter's mouth twitches; it is difficult to tell whether in amusement or displeasure. "Perhaps you'd have preferred a paper one from Doctor Bloom."

Doctor Alana Bloom is Hannibal Lecter's colleague, a resident who came along because she was the one who found the donor heart; Will had seen her twice, both times she greeted him with a smile.

"Perhaps." The curt response is inadequate and both of them feel it. There is tension here, Will realizes, tension that cuts like a rope wound tight. The air is filled with the sound of three hearts, one of which belongs to Will, one of which belongs to the doctor, one of which belongs to them both. Doctor Lecter runs his hand possessively over the box before picking it up. He leaves gracefully, telling Will that he's been assigned to the case, and to ring the call button should he need anything. Will eyes the button warily for a long time before falling asleep. The echoes of heartbeats drum in his ears when he dreams.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> i obviously don't have a beta reader so feel free to point out any spelling or grammar issues. or just volunteer to beta read. either works.

The morning of the surgery is quiet. Will wakes early; his window faces east and the cold watery sun falls across his face. The noises of nurses and orderlies in the hallway are muffled. It is too early for rounds, and his surgery is in the afternoon. Everything feels tranquil, like his room is under a lake. When Will was young, his father would take him to the lap pool at the YMCA as a special treat. Will had already known how to swim from years of helping with boats at the docks, but the blue chill of chlorine made the experience something fresh. He would let out his breath and sink all the way to the bottom of the pool, lungs shrinking, ears pained with the pressure. This moment, with the clinical scent of disinfectant and the half cloudy sky, reminds him of that.

He thinks, detached, about what is about to happen to him. How Lecter's heart in a box—his heart in a box—would soon be inside of his ribs. Doctor Lecter will cut deep into him, grab at his muscle with two gloved hands, and throw it away, replace it. What a waste, he thinks. If I could, I would keep it. I would put it on a stand in the middle of a museum. Those aren't his thoughts, not really. Will has always gravitated towards the mindsets of others, but he doesn't know Doctor Lecter well enough to fully mimic his thought process. It seems right, though, or perhaps he's subconsciously repeating the stereotype of most surgeons being psychopaths. Will lets himself explore anyway: the first cut, the suction carrying away his blood, the spatter of it on surgical gowns; his own body still on the operating table; the subtle rush of adrenaline; his chest like a cracked pomegranate, with droplets of scarlet as the seeds, his heart a strange exotic fruit. He cradles it, puts it to his lips, tongue darting out to taste... but no. The sloppy heat of organs and surgery spoil his mood; they do not fit with the light and the quiet. And most of it is a guess anyway, his imagination running wild. There are so many unhappy thoughts in his head that they all blend together. The homicide unit of the police department has tainted his empathy. Maybe he's just seeing what Lecter could be.

Will turns his attention to the window. Condensation beads at the edges of the glass. The sun is brighter. It washes the room in a light yellow, reflecting off the constant churn of blood behind plastic in the ECMO device. Will feels vaguely annoyed that he is unable to get up independently and brush his teeth. He takes off his oxygen mask, spits into his hand, wipes it on the bedsheets. He runs his tongue roughly over his teeth. His mouth tastes like copper.

It still hasn't hit him, he notes, that this is permanent. That he was hurt so badly he needs someone else's heart to keep alive. He wonders if it is too late to sign a DNR.

As if summoned by the thought, an intern appears. He's wearing a pink lanyard, with arrow-in-the-heart stickers on his nametag. He wishes Will a happy Valentine's Day, checks his vitals, checks the machines, and leaves. A few minutes later, a procession of surgeons rounds upon him. According to his chart, he is Will Graham, 27, suffering from constant arrythmia, pericarditis, weakness of the heart chambers, and the side effects of abnormal scar tissue after a stab wound to the left ventricle. One cardiac arrest six days ago—and worries of subsequent cardiac tamponade—prompted the discussion of a heart transplant, which will occur today at noon. Doctor Hannibal Lecter is performing the surgery, with the cardiothoracic head of New Orleans University Medical Center attending.

Will can feel the resentment from the residents on the case and almost smiles. This was supposed to be *their* surgery, *their* breakthrough, and now the new guy has taken it from them. Lecter is not even supposed to be here. As a doctor with her hair pulled back in a severe french braid shoots a glare at Lecter while he explains the logistics of the procedure, Will does actually manage a smile, a small, spiteful thing. He's sure that his oxygen mask hides the gesture, but Doctor Lecter pauses in his lecture for half a second.

"There are risks to this procedure, as with any other," continues Lecter. "With the amount of damage you have sustained previously, we expect you to wake up within three to four days after the end of the operation. Normally, this surgery would have taken place after a few weeks, but with such a case as yours, we cannot afford to wait. Another cardiac episode will be fatal."

Lecter isn't talking to Will, not really. He is allowing his students, because they are his students for as long as he is the lead surgeon, to learn from him. Even his tone of voice is steady and calm, unaffected by the dirty looks he receives. Will begins to feel stirrings of respect, but he is unsure if they are his or the residents'. Being in a room with so many people makes it difficult to recognize which feelings are truly his own.

"Do you have any questions before we begin prepping you for surgery, Mr. Graham?"

"No." Will hesitates. "But thank you, Doctor Lecter."

Lecter gives him a calculating look before the surgeons leave for other patients. Will is struck by the colour of his eyes, a rich, dark maroon. Out of place in a clean bright hospital. Smears of cocoa. Chocolate. Blood.

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It is 11:30 when a nurse comes into Will's room, fills a preoperative chart, and changes him into an operating gown. She has a scrub cap with pink hearts on it and her clipboard has a Valentine's Day themed sticker sheet on it.

"They're not for adult patients," she explains. "I'm usually in peds, but I was called in to do a few pre-ops today. Want a sticker anyway? I won't tell." While Will is torn between accepting and refusing, she gives him one. He sticks the bow and arrow onto his hand, heart-shaped arrowhead pointing out. As she bustles around, unhooking tubes and scribbling in her chart, Will feels her optimism. She's fresh off a good nights' sleep, still young enough not to

be jaded by this job, and he can tell that she's happy from the way her mouth quirks every time she thinks he's not looking.

He doesn't know what to say to her. He fights the urge to rip out all the lines that are connecting him to his bed and run out into the street, hail a cab, and climb up the stairs into his old shitty apartment. He would probably be dead of cardiac tamponade by the time he reached the lobby, dropping in the waiting room, clutching at his heart. No, he reassesses. He'd be dead as soon as he pulled out the lines of the ECMO machine. The wet whirring sound of said machine continues making background noise. Heart in a box, blood in a box, thinks Will with humour. Maybe they'd begin parting out the rest of him, too.

The nurses—there's suddenly more of them in the room—give him a surgical mask and begin wheeling him into the hall. Will feels every bump in the puckered, ugly stitches on his shoulder. He picks at the red electrical tape on the thick black strap that they've pulled into place around his waist. His face must show nerves because the sticker sheet nurse smiles at him and tells him that they'll be in the operating room soon. The thick slabs of drywall on the ceiling pass and pass. They turn right, up a story in the elevator, and into the OR. The smell of cleaner and disinfectant can't hide the sharp metal scent of dried blood. Well, Will thinks as the anesthesiologists begin their dance of sleep and needles, at least it smells familiar.

Will dreams of a snowy river. He's casting a line, he's named it, he's hungry. He knows he won't catch anything in the dead of winter. The water rushes past his legs; there are white rapids far ahead of him. The bottom of the river is rocky with pebbles, slick with algae. He is dripping in red, colouring his surroundings a thin pink. His hook catches against something and he reels it in. It's an empty organ transport box. He breathes out through his nose, wades to shore, and stacks it in the pile of those he's already fished out of the stream.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> took some time to plot this story out: now i'm half sure of what's going to happen instead of a quarter sure. i know how it ends but i don't know how it will get there.

Awareness comes slowly. It begins as a hazy impression of voices, the shuffle of feet, the beeping of a heart monitor. It is very similar to listening to an alarm clock through a dream. The noise weaves its way into the rush of the river. He ignores what he hears, mostly because he's exhausted, but also because there's no other stimuli to keep his interest. He can't feel, can't see, can't smell, can't taste. There is a familiar lilt to one of the voices, but he can't make himself care either. He drifts.

A few weeks later, or perhaps a few minutes later, he begins to recognize a scent too. It's spicy but cool, impersonal, chemical. Cologne. Underneath it, like in the operating room, old blood. He can't think, so he doesn't think about it.

Even later, he begins to feel the sheets beneath him, the blanket on top. It's warm and comfortable, stifling, confining, pleasant. His arms are cold. He can't move them.

Once, just once, he feels something absolutely awful happening to his throat and his mouth. He tastes his own breath for a second. But then, it's gone, pulled out of him, and he fills his lungs. Ventilator, says some part of his brain lazily. Shut up, says the other part. Waking up would be intolerable.

Will feels the presence of whoever comes with the spicy scent. The presence sits in the chair next to his bed often. At other times, it moves around his medical equipment. Sometimes, it comes with others, and it talks in that familiar lilt. He feels a small dip in the mattress, an elbow or a head. It must be one of the only quiet places on the floor, Will thinks. It sleeps here, next to him, in the monotony of medical machinery. The realization tires him.

He smells the cologne often enough to begin picking out the notes. Spice, of course, cloves and cardamom and nutmeg and wood. Mint and green tea. Night wind. Ripe blackberries. Musk. And then that lovely, bright, undertone of blood. Will remembers, or he remembers someone else's memories, of the rush that comes with being the cause of blood. Homicide detective with something he suspects is more than abnormal empathy. He has had more than one nightmare about becoming whatever monster he was chasing. He would wake shaking, sweating, invigorated. His adrenal glands would work overtime, he would cover his bedding in towels. He doesn't wake now, but he can hear the heart monitor beep faster.

The next time he is conscious, he opens his eyes. It is late night, or early in the morning. The windows show the moon, a single open eye. The moon is looking back at him. Goodnight

Moon, Will thinks hysterically, and passes out.

What truly gets him awake is discomfort. His eyelashes flutter, blinking against the bright lights of his room, the penlight, and against the fingers holding his eye open. He manages to wordlessly protest, and focuses on the source of the disturbance.

In front of him is a devil. The antlers that come out of its head reach far to the sides. It is pitch black, shiny, like latex. Its eyes are blank and unseeing. He does not hear its voice as much as he feels it in his head.

You're awake. How are you feeling? Any pain?

A nurse walks in with a cup of water. Will grabs at it, the liquid spilling from the sides of the cup and down the corners of his lips as he drinks it. She introduces herself: she is assigned to his care. The devil doesn't disappear. He only answers questions addressed by the nurse.

It's March. He was semi-comatose. He's in the ICU. It's been two and a half weeks since Doctor Lecter gave him a permanent valentine.

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Will receives his mobile phone the next day and he spends the first ten minutes answering the messages that have accumulated on it. There are embarrassingly few. One from his detective partner, three from various acquaintances, one from the NOPD, two from his dentist to confirm an appointment. One from his father. The need for friends has never overtaken him, but Will feels a sudden loneliness that drops into his stomach. He wishes he had someone who would have sat with him, slept by his side at night visiting hours be damned.

There is a small flower arrangement on his windowsill that seems to be from his work. Nobody chipped in a whole lot, he thinks, looking at the wilted cotton candy pink petals.

After that, he googles side effects of major surgery. Luckily, hallucinations seem common enough. They should disappear after a few days, he reads, after fighting through a wall of pop-up ads. It doesn't make the experience any less unpleasant. He knows he should tell someone about it, but he doesn't feel inclined to tell his surgeon that he's put on a demon suit. Or, Will thinks darkly, that maybe he's shed his person one. Neither is preferable.

The decision is cemented when he reads that extended hallucinations require psychological assessments. Will has tried therapy before and even tentative mentions of what he feels on a regular basis have led to that inevitable sentence: Will, I need you to know that I am required by law to report you if you... Fill in the blank, fill in the blank. The only reason that Will even passed the psychological screening for the academy was shameless nepotism and luck. His father had drinking buddies in the police force in the small town where they lived, and the sheriff only came to Beau Graham to get his boat motors fixed. They turned a blind eye. When Will transferred to New Orleans, nobody bothered to double check their work.

So, either the devil will go away or he'll learn to live with it.

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The ICU is boring. Will spends so much time on his phone during the first day that he grows sick of it. He plugs his headphones in and tries listening to music but any sound that isn't hospital machinery feels like it's too overwhelming. He tries getting out of bed but a nurse appears from thin air and ushers him back under his sheets. In the end, he lays back and daydreams. There is a harsh quality to the ICU that is sweetened by the addition of his imagination. The walls warp and swirl to become trees, dogs surround him, he scents the air like a wild animal. His heart in a box lays hidden in the woods: he hunts it down, but stomps out the urge to bite into it. He puts it into his chest instead.

He snaps out of it when it's time for anti-rejection meds. The pills are smooth against his tongue.

The moss and dirt underneath his feet are soft, dewed, cold; he pets the beasts that surround him, rides the strange black stag. Sometimes, he fishes by the river. He still doesn't catch anything. Eventually, Doctor Lecter joins him in the water.

"You don't look particularly demonic in my head," Will says without really looking at him.

"I imagine not. Your hallucinations are warnings, not curses."

"Warning not to go back into reality? Good riddance. It's much more peaceful here."

The doctor hums his disapproval. Will turns then, and his breath catches at the subtle wrongness of what he sees. Lecter's eyes are enormous in his skull, predatory and observing. His teeth are small and sharp. The caricature of the doctor, because it's only a caricature, a drawing, a guess, isn't quite right. Will doesn't like haziness in his dreams. The next time he hears Lecter's voice in the outside world, he surfaces, smears away the dark gleaming hallucination, and memorizes his face.

Chapter 4

Eventually, Will starts physical therapy. More and more often, Doctor Lecter takes the role of supervisor. The hallucinations have abated some, but they are not gone completely. Today, Lecter jumps between demon and man at random. Will's hands grip tight on his walker, which he resents, and his steps are small and laboured. The hospital gown swishes around his knees.

Will hates that Lecter has begun overseeing his progress nearly every day; sometimes stabilizing him when he stumbles, sometimes just hovering over his shoulder as he walks. He feels weak. Displaying that weakness is humiliating, especially near the doctor. Will has been getting better, he knows it, but the degradation continues to sting, like a cut that he worries at until it opens again and again. The first soft congratulations after a lap around the floor makes him feel violated. The fact that he is exhausted is salt in the wound.

Another facet of Lecter's presence is that Will sees his face enough that it satisfies the need to have him sharp and clear in his head. There is a divide between the doctor and Dr. Lecter but Will is still glad that soon he will be gone from the hospital. There has been one instance, long in his past: high school years, where a confused dream translated to reality and had just begun to feed an obsession (slick red, quiet, then in the forest, a muffled scream) before his father announced a move to another town. The fact that he moved often was a blessing in that case, as was the lack of social media. Will observes his connection of that situation with the current one with some unease.

"You are finished for today, I think," says Lecter. "You've overexerted yourself."

Will feels his heart pounding in his ears, a perversion of hearing the ocean in a seashell. A cold sweat washes over him with a shiver and he tips sideways, ready to shatter. Lecter is ready for it, looks prepared for the slow toppling way that Will falls. He never hits the floor: strong hands hold his shoulders.

"Will? Can you hear me? Do you know where you are? Can you stand up?"

Will looks over at the doctor, knee deep in the river. "You did that on purpose."

The doctor shrugs gracefully. "Overexertion may cause lightheadedness, any first year medical student would know that," he admits. The half confession makes Will bark a short laugh.

"Will, if you can hear me, squeeze my fingers. Will, I'm going to lift you up now." His feet leave the riverbed. He's floating above the water, he's being held in someone's arms. "No need for a gurney, thank you, his bed is just over there."

"Not necessary," Will mouths at the words but he can't make them audible. He can smell spices and blackberries and something sweet and rotting.

His bedsheets are scratchy underneath his skin. A presence sits by his bed, writing on a clipboard. Will squints his eyes, and a blank face, horned, plastic black, stares back.

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On the second day, he makes it three times around the floor before he has to lean against a wall for support. Lecter begins to look encouraging, but at Will's frustrated expression, wipes his face clean of emotion. It doesn't look unnatural on him, thinks Will, the lack of feeling; it looks as though he's been practicing being human and finally allowed to rest.

"I just need some rest before I go back to my room."

"Of course. Take all the time you need."

Will cools his forehead against the painted cinderblocks, and when he opens his eyes and looks into the hallway, it is empty except for the demon beside him. Its ribs are prominent, starvation thin, antlers almost touching each wall, fingers long long long, down by its knees.

Are you ready to walk again?

"Yes."

They walk side by side. It feels like fear, subtle, against the back of his neck. It feels like power, too.

Once they get back to Will's room, the demon sits on the seat next to the bed. Will has tried to never look too closely at it lest it turn up in his nightmares, but the opportunity tempts him. Its face is the doctors face, wide, bald. Its body bulges in odd places, like its organs have grown wrong. The eyes are white, pure white.

You haven't looked at me in the eyes ever since we met. What has changed?

Will has to remind himself that he's actually speaking to Lecter underneath the demon suit.

"I am not fond of eye contact," he says. "It is difficult for me to focus on the conversation when I engage in it."

And now? You seem to be doing well.

He panics. "Your eyes... aren't that interesting." Will feels the air go still. The demon has taken offense. "That's not what I meant," he reiterates, "firstly, we weren't having a conversation while I was looking at your eyes, and secondly I was wondering what colour they were." The excuse is beyond flimsy and Will isn't a good liar, he's too open, too empathetic.

What is your conclusion? About the colour?

Will is suddenly grateful that he knows Lecter's face by heart.

"Brown. Maroon, really. I've never seen anyone's eyes be reddish like that."

“Interesting observation,” says Dr. Hannibal Lecter. “Your eyes, as you already know, are just blue. Not particularly interesting either.” He quirks his lips in a smile.

The rudeness is startling. “I suspect we’ll both find each other interesting at some point,” Will says. Lecter considers that. “We might,” he acquiesces. “I have other patients, Mr. Graham. I must take my leave of you.”

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“You were rude,” Will grumbles.

“I am never rude. Only truthful,” says the doctor.

They are not in the river this time, but deep in a forest. The underbrush isn’t thick, but brambles and tree branches catch against Will’s oversized fishing vest. There’s a smear of blood (whose?) on the inside of his wrist. He is young in the dream, only fifteen.

“And,” the doctor continues, “I think you must have been rude first.”

“You can’t be proud of a deduction that is ultimately mine,” Will grumbles. “You’re in my head after all.”

They keep walking. Slick red travels its way down Will’s front. The muffled scream will come next, soon, soon. Too young, no support system, she killed herself in the woods...

“Where are we going?” The doctor’s voice shocks Will into looking over and he sees that the doctor is only a teenager now too. His hair is cropped close to his ears, he is wearing a school uniform. If Will squints, there is a necklace of teeth around his neck.

“Whose biters?” he asks, and then regrets it. The vocabulary is vulgar and the question itself... It would be akin to the young doctor asking whose blood on Will’s chest. Rude. Intimate. Unspeakably so. It is a dream though, so he just takes it back, makes it not happen. The doctor looks at him distrustfully anyway.

He replaces the words with another sentence. “I can’t call you the doctor when we’re this young."

“Hannibal instead, then,” says the other boy.

“Alright.”

Then, the scream erupts through the pine needles, and they run, silent, from the past.

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When Lecter takes Will up a set of stairs, Will feels so unhappy and tired that he starts asking uncomfortable questions.

“Why are you here?”

“Excuse me?”

“I thought you were from Johns Hopkins. But you’ve been here for weeks.”

Hannibal pauses. “I assigned myself to your case. You were my first completely solo heart transplant. The chief of this hospital found himself amenable to my decision.”

“So, you charmed the head into giving you a position. You must be good.” Will tries to make the fact that he’s gasping for air imperceptible but he’s doing a poor job of it.

“Some would say so.”

“Very humble of you. You either must be dedicated to your job, or you wanted to see more of me."

"A doctor always wants to see more of his patient, should they be ill."

"And I am ill enough to remain a priority, it seems."

Will proves his point by accidentally choking on his breath. He clears his throat after a couple of coughs, but out of curiosity, doubles over, and kneels down on the step in front of him. His lungs hurt. His eyes are watering. He wants to see what Lecter does.

The doctor waits. Will thinks that if he had a heart attack at that very moment, Lecter wouldn’t do a thing to help him. Finally, Will stops coughing and stands back up.

“Back to your room, I think,” says Lecter.

“I just like seeing you suffer because you’ve been rude to me,” says Hannibal from behind a tree. “Try being more interesting, he likes that.”

“Try being interesting with a newly transplanted heart,” Will mutters, but neither of the Hannibals hear him.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

writing this will is so tricky. also i have been unbelievably busy these past few weeks,

The stairs become an easier task to surmount as the days pass. Lecter takes him every time, and every time, Will makes it up another few steps. The stairwell is mostly deserted; most of the hospital staff takes the elevator, and it's just them in the echoing gray silence. The concrete is heavy and the windows are south facing. The light is the same as in his room: watery, white, wilted. The stairwell feels like a sanctuary. When Will climbs the stairs, he's climbing onto the altar. A sacrifice, he thinks to himself, like the Aztecs gave their people to the sun god. Lecter sometimes stands in front of the window, watching him. His hair is a halo, his eyebrows are yellow with sunlight, eyelashes too.

The hallucinations have lessened a degree, but he still sees antlers on Lecter at times, sees the stag itself in others. Today, the sun and the horns and the stairwell combine. Sun god, Will thinks again, panting as he holds the railing. Lecter tilts his head like a curious animal.

It's almost reverence. It's almost worship. It's almost mutual.

Will, with his precious and hated ability to see into other people, watches himself through Lecter's eyes. He sees himself as the strange and stunted man he is, the mystery and stamped down charisma. He sees the mess of characteristics he's adopted to try to appear normal. He looks up at Lecter and smiles sardonically. Lecter, after a pause, quirks his mouth in a physical echo.

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Will can't sleep that night. His bed is filled with rain soaked moss. He isn't connected to any electrodes, so he leaves the room. His feet are bloody and mud streaks up his legs. He walks like a spectre through the bright halls of his unit. There is nobody around. The clicking footsteps of a nurse pass through the hallway, untethered to a body. The deep snorting breaths of a stag follow his path. He is clean, he is filthy; he leaves tracks on the floor, he floats above it.

"Good evening," says Hannibal. He's older this time, college age. He's wearing a pressed white shirt and a blazer. So formal, so cold already.

"How's school? Did the interview go well?" asks Will. The question is hollow. Whatever Hannibal answers will be Will's own guess. This boy is such a poor attempt at knowing the real one. All he can accurately speculate about him are the reactions, the slow development of

his facial expressions, from furious frown to a twitch of the eyebrow, from warm laughter to a polite smile.

“It went as well as one could expect.”

“Very diplomatic of you.”

“Thank you.” A pause. “Where are we walking?”

Will touches the door to the stairwell, which he must have walked up to at some point, but it seems like it has just appeared under his hand. “Up to the rooftop, I guess,” he says, and pushes it open.

The city is all small pinprick stars through the windows, and when Will’s forehead and arms bead with sweat, they reflect the light. The stairwell is dim; the light pollution is the only illumination. His legs ache and he feels the swell of nausea in his throat. Hannibal walks beside him.

“You know so much about me, yet so little. Am I only a reflection of your own mind, or do you catch glimpses of the good doctor and translate them onto my actions? Or am I simply what could be, what might have been?”

“I think it’s a bad sign when your hallucinations question their own reality,” Will pants.

He has to stop and sit down for a while on a landing.

“I think it’s a bad idea for you to be climbing these stairs in your condition,” sniffs Hannibal.

“You’re the one who told me to be more interesting.”

“Shaking because of three flights of stairs does not necessarily garner interest. Unless you’re attempting to inspire pity.”

Will doesn’t know what to say to that, so he stands up and keeps going.

They reach the top. Will suspected, even when he first started climbing, that the door to the rooftop would be locked. He had been anticipating a slow, disappointed trek down to his room. He pauses when he sees that the door is actually cracked open, with a doorstop wedged into the gap to keep it from closing all the way. He looks over to his companion, and Hannibal’s teeth are glistening and wet in his mouth and in that necklace around his collar. Will thinks he’s smiling. He isn’t sure.

For March, the air is warm. The day had been sunny and bright, and though the temperature has dropped, the asphalt under his bare feet still retains some heat. The breeze catches on his hair, on his hospital gown. He hears Hannibal beside him, a slow sigh that calms him, makes him wish something vague and uncentered. The longing isn’t borne of love, but of the quiet affection of being around someone for a long time, of the sweet silence that is built by hearing someone who is asleep breathe.

Will sees Doctor Lecter leaning against the cement barrier between roof and empty air. Doctor Lecter sees him too. Will expects it to be awkward, embarrassing. Instead, it's companionable. He walks to the doctor on shaky legs and grabs hold of the barrier to keep himself upright. They look out onto the city.

Will breaks the silence. "I congratulate you on the effects of your physical therapy. Not bad for a cardiothoracic surgeon."

"I dabbled in orthopedics. And I think it is you who deserves the congratulations."

"Very humble of you, doctor."

A siren wails. Will grimaces.

"Do the sirens remind you of your injury?" asks Lecter.

"No, honestly. They remind me of work."

"They never did tell me what you do, only that you were in the police force. An officer, then?" It's small talk, but at least it's polite.

"I'm a homicide detective," says Will.

The space between them tightens. Lecter glances at him. His eyes are pitch black in the night, or maybe it's Will's mind turning him into a monster again.

"That must have been difficult work. Thank you for your service."

Will laughs. He doesn't know why. It seems ridiculous now that he's being thanked for something so thankless, something that haunts him, something that landed him in the hospital.

"It's not necessarily hard, it just leaves a mark. Creating profiles of bad people tends to leave a bitter taste in my mouth."

"You feel as though every mind you inhabit becomes your own."

The insight is painful. "I suppose you dabbled in psychiatry too, Doctor Lecter."

"I suppose I did. Sometimes the emotional aspect of an injury is why people recover more slowly. Was the case you were working on the reason why you became the victim of a stabbing?"

"Technically yes, but victim is generous. I was just collateral."

"Is that how you see yourself, Will? As collateral?"

"No. Or maybe not entirely. I feel as though—" Will stops himself. "I think you've had a bit more than a brief dabble in psychiatry. At any rate, I'm no good at being psychoanalyzed."

“So you’ve had previous experience?”

“Some.”

“Do you feel inclined to share?”

Will doesn’t, but the rooftop seems so far away from the regular little people walking on the sidewalks below, and so far away from his own problems, and he's still on medication that makes the world fuzzy, so he speaks anyway.

“I did my bachelor’s in forensics and criminology a year after the police academy. I worked part-time as a beat cop through it. I became... stressed. It was suggested that I see a counsellor to help. The counsellor referred me to a therapist, who referred me to a psychiatrist. I didn’t go to the psychiatrist. It might have reflected poorly on any applications to the FBI.”

“You want to join the FBI?”

“The Behavioural Analysis Unit, in particular. They’ve already had me come in as a guest lecturer about a particular homicide that turned into a series of murders.”

Lecter takes a breath. “You’re interested in catching serial killers.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you might be one,” Hannibal says. “With all those murderers in your head.”

“Because I want to help people,” Will says. “And I can’t stand to know them and allow them to roam uncaught.”

“To know them?” says Doctor Lecter.

“To be them?” says Hannibal.

“When I build a profile, or find a case, I inhabit the killer’s mindset. I know them all intimately, personally. If they die, it feels like a part of me disappears.”

“Who are you then, Will? Is there even a Will, or is it everyone you’ve ever met, stacked like cake layers in your head?” asks Hannibal.

“Is it very difficult to separate them from yourself? Your pain from theirs?” asks Doctor Lecter.

“I have a line, but I drew it myself. It’s random. I don’t even know if it’s correct.”

“So all pain is equal,” they say together.

Yes, Will thinks, looking down at the sidewalk again. All pain is equal. Lecter's hands are close to his own on the concrete, and they are shiny and matte black and the fingers lengthen and bones crack. He feels the urge to move his own fingers to cover them, make them skin and flesh again. He gives in to the instinct, but it doesn't help. His human hand is pale against the monstrosity. He looks up into the devil's cold blank eyes. The young Hannibal laughs.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> plot! finally. i originally planned this to fit in 10 chapters but it might not so we'll see where it goes. also, do tell me what you think. likes? dislikes? complaints? allergies? coffee requests?

They don't mention it. Will isn't quite sure if it really happened. He doesn't even know how he got back into his bed, he doesn't remember walking down the stairs. Lecter doesn't distance himself from Will, not exactly, but he's more hurried. More passionate in his work too, flitting around the room, mothlike, from blinking light to blinking light. It looks like theatrics to Will. Look here, breathe in, breathe out, hold out your arm for a blood pressure cuff, and then he's gone. A magician's parlour trick: where is the white rabbit? Who will follow him to Wonderland?

Will's work starts calling. When he picks up, he's greeted by a perfunctory question about his well-being, and when he says that he's probably going to be in care for a while yet, an urgent offer to work from the hospital as a consultant. Will agrees, mostly because, in that moment, he realizes that hospitals cost money and he doesn't know how much his insurance is willing to cover. The hours will be useful, especially as he doesn't have much else to do, anyway.

He only realizes why they want him so desperately when he looks at the case files. This type of homicide is going to be snapped up by the FBI quickly, his boss wants to make their unit look capable. Will, even when hooked up to machines, is the perfect tool to do that.

I wonder, he thinks resignedly, if that's all I'll ever be to them. I would do better in the BAU. At least I'd be an important tool there.

He tosses all the papers with current theories and profiles, focusing on the pictures first. There are two victims. One lays on a mattress in an alleyway, wrapped from the waist down in a sheet. He is curled around a red rose. His eyes are neatly stitched closed. His chest is a ravaged mess, an empty cavity with heart and lungs missing. The second is flesh and muscle, positioned to sit on the corner of the mattress. He is holding the bloody flaps of his own skin in his hands. Will feels their pain, feels the way they suffered. He writhes in his starched sheets, feeling the phantom sensation of someone skinning him. Of someone stabbing a knife into his chest and ripping him open.

Will fights the urge to vomit. He doesn't succeed, and empties his stomach into a bag that sits conveniently on the table next to his bed.

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“My opinion is that the killer is making self portraits. He’s vain, narcissistic. He believes that he is being revealed, so he's self-reflecting.”

“So now he’s meditating. Should we be looking up yoga studios?”

Will sighs, and rubs at his eyes.

“Someone is making him reflect. Someone is forcing the issue.”

“We have two killers?”

“No. The person who’s causing this is completely unaware of it. He stitched the man’s eyes shut, for God’s sake. The inspiration could not be more blind than if his eyes were plucked out. But he wants him to see, eventually. Stitches can be unravelled.”

“But there will be more.”

“Yes. I think there will be many more. I think there were plenty before this one, too. He was just in an artistic slump. He has a muse now.”

“Damn it, Graham. We’re sending this to the FBI.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“Rest up. They might want to see you.”

“I can barely climb up a flight of stairs, let alone walk to an office,” he lies. He’s been consistently climbing up and down stairs in physical therapy. Anything more, though, and he’s bedridden. Complication due to the extent of the coma, says a doctor that works the night shift.

“They’ll probably go see you in person, then.”

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Doctor Lecter brings his lunch into Will’s room when he thinks Will is asleep. This is the second time he’s done this. The first was a few days ago, when Will was so lost in daydreaming that he wasn’t sure it actually happened. Now, Will dozes and Lecter snaps the lid off of a container full of something that smells savoury and spiced. The thought of meat makes Will’s stomach churn, especially after the pictures. Lecter eats quickly, as if anticipating a pager going off. The clink of metal against glass—because of course Lecter has either a plate or a glass tupperware—echoes in Will’s dreams. The human sound of swallowing, too.

He dreams of Hannibal as a young adult. He’s more confident, more self-assured. They sit together on a clinical white bench in front of the river. Rain taps against the rocks.

“What do you think of the pictures?” asks Will.

“Everything he does is calculated, I think. But he’s rusty. Think of how rushed it was, how messy. The chest opened like that; he wanted to do it with a scalpel, but he didn’t have the tools. He’s still thinking the way he did when he was young.” Hannibal looks at him and Will quietly admires the cut of his face, the strong cheekbones.

“We’re in agreement. This isn’t his first kill.”

“We have to be in agreement. I am, after all, a figment of your imagination.”

Will quirks an eyebrow. “How old are you now?”

“Around twenty. Last time you saw me, I was seventeen or eighteen, I think.”

“Are you going to keep aging this way? In jumps?”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal considers. “I liked this age. I discovered so much, yet knew so little. It was a time where I could go anywhere, be anyone.”

“Was it your favourite age to be?”

“I don’t know the answer to that. You should talk to Lecter and find out.”

-

The FBI sends a representative to Will during visiting hours. He introduces himself as Jack Crawford, one person in a mass of Behavioural Science division managers. He’s tall and imposing; not threatening, but learning how to be.

“We have a second crime scene,” he says to Will. “I was told you could potentially have insights. This is, plainly speaking, off the books. I’d appreciate it if you kept this to yourself for now. If what you say is useful, we’re willing to pay a consultant fee.”

He pauses. “You’ll have to sign this, too.” He slides over an NDA.

After Will reads over the paper and signs it, Crawford hands over a folder. This time, it’s just pictures and a short description of the surroundings.

It’s another self-portrait, he knows immediately. The same tableau: two men, one asleep, one sitting. This time, the sleeping man’s heart is held carefully in the hands of the sitting man. A bite is torn out of it like an apple. The sleeping man is missing a good deal of the meat from his thigh.

“Are you tracing teeth and saliva on that?” asks Will.

“It’s not a bite mark, it’s just carved out to look that way.”

“He wants this connection, between him and his muse, but it has to be faked right now because the muse isn’t paying attention. He’s debating a reveal, not planning it yet. This is all art to him, it’s metaphorical.”

“What’s his motive?” Crawford demands. Will looks at him, unimpressed.

“Do you know what his motive may be?” Crawford rewords.

“Loneliness. He wants connection. He sees the potential for it in his muse. Love, maybe.”

“Psychopaths don’t feel love that way.”

“He does,” shrugs Will. “Or he just really wants to.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

plot! also manipulative hannibal. you know how it is.

The hospital room is supposed to be sterile, white, clean, but the more Will sinks into this case, the dirtier it seems to him. The blinds cast prison bar shadows over the walls, his bed is grimy, his machines are greying. Once, the floor is covered by a maroon brown mud, like clay, and Will thinks of Lecter's eyes. The pictures he looks at crease until the spidery white lines separate the shot into four quadrants. They're like windows, and sometimes Will uses his imagination to jump through them, shattering like glass, onto the crime scenes. There's not much he can get from pictures aside from a feeling of passion, the longing to be truly seen, and a general sense of unease.

Lecter notices him carding through the photographs one day and stops in the middle of taking a note in Will's file. Will almost dismisses it as civilian shock at the gore, but Lecter's demeanour isn't scared. It's the stillness of surprise, not horror. His mouth opens a little to take in a breath, as though to say something, but words don't pass his lips. His grip tightens on the file, and the little notebook stacked on top of it. He lets the air out again and continues writing.

Will is at a loss. He wants to diffuse this awkward tension, just him and Lecter in a room. He isn't sure what explanation would suit the situation best.

"Homicide," he finally murmurs, putting the pictures into a folder, "it isn't glamorous and it never takes a break."

"Not even when the detective is in hospital," Lecter replies, his accent curling in the air like smoke.

"No, not even then."

"But those were not regular homicides. They did not look like everyday stabbings."

"They are not. A serial killer, we think, if the pattern continues."

"We?"

Will stops himself, remembering the non-disclosure agreement. "Doctor-patient confidentiality?" he jokes weakly.

"Of course, Will." The answer is immediate. It's not eager, but the quickness startled him.

“The FBI has me on this. It started in the NOPD, but it’s out of their jurisdiction now.”

“Is this a congratulatory moment? I seem to remember your wish for this very situation.”

It’s the first time they’ve mentioned the night where Will grabbed at Lecter’s hand. They’re both thinking of it, and Will imagines the gravity of a black hole between them, drawing them into the same space. Lecter seems to feel it, too; he leans forward a little.

“No congratulation necessary, but thank you. I just provide insight.”

“Compensated insight?”

“Yes. Insurance can’t cover every treatment, so I need the hours.”

Lecter doesn’t seem to approve. “You need to talk to someone about these. Someone professional.”

“I don’t have the money for that.”

“It doesn’t have to be in a professional context, just in a professional manner. Conversations. I could find you someone willing to do pro bono work. From a purely medical standpoint, stress isn’t good for your heart. You’re still in a hospital bed, after all.”

“I could go home soon,” says Will. “I’ve been getting better.”

Lecter’s face is stony. “Not as quickly as you should. Your recovery is still in its early stages.”

That isn’t necessarily true, thinks Will. His hallucinations are few and far between, he can walk longer distances and climb stairs, he can eat food that isn’t puddings and smoothies. He should be home, in his tiny apartment, visiting the hospital every few weeks for checkups. He read about the recovery time for heart surgery, and he’s been here a hell of a lot longer than that. Yet, he admits to himself that he wants to stay. The hospital is a break, it’s a sanctuary, nobody bothers him here outside of visiting hours and those are blissfully short. He hasn’t realized how exhausted he’s been. He’s only 27 and he’s bone tired. The nurses are blissfully busy. Lecter is easy to be around. The Hannibal hallucination is his empathetic reaction, it’s inevitable; the man himself is impossible to analyze. He doesn’t take up unwanted space in his conscious. Everything Will thinks about him is intentional.

He likes that.

As long as nobody is kicking him out, he’d rather stay.

Will is so hooked by the thought that when Lecter finishes injecting something into the IV, jots it down in his notebook, and slips out the door, he doesn’t even notice. He sleeps, and the solution goes drip-drip-drip into his bloodstream.

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Will wakes to droplets of water hitting his hand, which is resting on a pillow next to his head. Hannibal is lying next to him on the hospital bed. He's crying.

Will's usual reaction to people crying is the tug of empathy which leaves him off balance and causes him to struggle against tears. He has an innate distaste for other people's emotions because they push out any room for his own. He becomes them, in the most general sense; he stops being Will Graham and turns into someone else. He stops recognizing the place where their emotions end and his begin. It's just one enormous overlap, like rivers running into the sea.

Hannibal isn't like that. Will knows it's because he's a hallucination, but the relief he feels leaves a frisson running down his spine. He wouldn't know what to do, how to forgive himself, if Hannibal needed him and all Will could do was reflect the emotions. A funhouse mirror is not particularly comforting.

"What happened?"

"Someone died."

"Someone you cared about? A family member? A friend?"

Hannibal shakes his head. His forehead wrinkles and he looks up at the ceiling. He won't meet Will's eyes. "I don't know. You don't know, so I don't either. All you know is how I'd react."

Will pets Hannibal's hair, makes all the correct shushing and 'there there' noises, but it's not enough.

"Who am I mourning?" Hannibal cries out. "Why won't you just ask him!"

"I will. I will, I promise. You're going to be alright. I'll find out."

Will keeps making reassurances as Hannibal melts away, as blood slowly slides down the walls, as the stag, who had been long gone from his visions, stands in the doorway.

-

Will isn't sure if he's slept at all. He spent the night in a warm huddle on his bed, sweat dampening the sheets. There were animals and hearts in his walls. His body kept shrinking and growing. He was an ant, he was a redwood tree. There was a feeling of ecstasy, of paranoia that filled his chest until it was springing out of him. Now, he feels hungover. His muscles are tired, the light is too strong, even when his eyelids are closed. It's late in the afternoon. By some miracle, rounding teams of medical students have left him alone today.

A nurse comes by with lunch, inhales sharply at his blood pressure. Will talks her out of reporting his status to a doctor, citing a bad dream. She walks him through some breathing exercises, which actually seem to help, and leaves.

Will picks at the lunch, which is an unappetizing pile of salad, potatoes, and mystery meat. He's about to give in and take a bite when Lecter comes in with a small bag. The doctor

immediately stops and backs away.

“You’re awake. I’m sorry, I’ll go elsewhere.”

“No, it’s alright. Really.”

“Thank you.” Lecter sits in the chair in the corner, and unpacks two tupperware boxes. He opens one, and the smell makes Will realize how hungry he is. His expression must reflect that because Lecter smiles and walks over with the second tupperware. He leaves it on Will’s side table. No expectation to partake, just a silent offer.

Will snaps open the lid, grabs his plastic fork, and lifts it to his mouth. It looks like scrambled eggs, dotted with beef and vegetables. He chews carefully, relishing the warmth of the reheated meal.

“Protein scramble,” says Lecter from across the room. He looks satisfied.

“A family recipe?” asks Will, and for a second, he can almost feel Hannibal’s approval radiating in his head.

“Not quite.”

Will pushes at the topic. “Something you picked up in your many wondrous travels?”

“Family recipe is closer to the mark. My aunt used to order it in the mornings when I was a boy. Her ladies’ club would come to talk and eat, but I never had anyone for breakfast until I was older. I find it more intimate than a dinner setting. I try my utmost to do so often. Like now.”

Will spears a bell pepper and the taste of it is perfect, sweet and smoky.

“She sounds like a very elegant woman.”

“She was.” Was!

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Lecter affects something like sadness, but it doesn’t reach his mouth, which is lightly upturned. “She died when I was a young man. The grief never quite disappears. I try to remember her as best I can.”

“Well, thank you for sharing your tradition with me.” An aunt. He would have mourned her. He would have heard the news and cried like Hannibal did last night, all alone in his room, and gone to rounds the next morning.

“Thank you for sharing your space.”

Will chuckles softly. “You’ve done it without permission before anyway.”

Lecter blinks. “I should apologize. I wasn’t aware that you were awake. This is one of the quietest rooms in the hospital, it’s so tucked away, so I had lunch here once or twice.”

“I don’t mind, as long as you share your food. This is excellent.” Will’s fork scrapes sadly against the edges of the tupperware. Empty.

Lecter’s usual distant demeanor shifts into something incandescent. He almost smiles, lips parting, showing teeth.

“A fair price for some peace. Or good conversation.”

A few hours later, Will gets a phone call from Crawford. They’ve found another pair of victims, this time with cuts of meat missing from their legs.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

thanks so much to @mxjules for beta reading :,)

The deaths continue. They connect the killer to cold case after cold case, and days after they connect the dots, the pattern changes. Doctor Lecter hosts tiny dinner parties, luncheons for two, and breakfasts, every week. They have conversations, and Lecter allows him to spill the full extent of the cases onto the floor between them, picking up what seems relevant. Will, after the slow climb towards health, deteriorates. His walls crawl with spiders, fir trees, moss. Will sees the kills, experiences the clinical snip of scissors against flesh, the slice of scalpel against bones. But this only truly happens after Lecter leaves him. More often than not, Lecter is the only normalcy that Will experiences. It is his absence that brings horror. He sits, clean and tidy, in his white coat and smiles as Will chews. He serves ribs like praying hands, salad like butterfly wings studded with bacon, meat in everything like a hidden treasure. He has not touched Will's IV since that first meal.

Will becomes dependent on those meetings. He hallucinates wildly after them, and without Lecter, it becomes an endless echo of visual tricks. Sometimes, it's deaths and river water. Sometimes, it's heartachingly lovely. It always calms after about twelve hours.

Will begins to long for it. He spends his days looking through case files, as if the fact that he works himself to exhaustion might give him back the rare exhilaration of a beautiful hallucination. But only Lecter, and his delicate spiced dishes, ever bring the relief of a calm stream. Hannibal is with him through it all, at his right shoulder like a conscience. Lecter and Will have conversations often, so Hannibal and Will speak constantly. It's like a monologue, Will justifies to himself, but sometimes he mutters his answers to Hannibal's questions aloud.

"Look at that," Will says, "He's destroying the muse and making him in his image."

The crime scene shows a victim, looking at a patchwork of limbs, like puzzle pieces. He has another person's fingers cradled in each palm.

"How do you know it's in his image? Maybe the muse is just falling apart." Hannibal points at the picture. He's older now, but just by a few months. Twenty-one at most. "And he doesn't know how to fix it, so he's continuing the pattern."

Will sniffs in annoyance. "Yeah, maybe." His southern twang is such a delicious contrast against Hannibal's Parisian-Lithuanian-Italian accent that he says it again. "Maybe."

His conversations with Doctor Lecter, though vaguely therapeutic at times, also reveal facts that make Hannibal more solid in his mind. He's well-traveled, he has a family, he has a past.

Everything makes its way to his Hannibal.

It's been days since their last lunch, and he's already craving the odd electric taste that permeates everything Lecter serves him. When he asks, Lecter says it's cardamom. Will's instincts say that it's a lie, but they also tell him Hannibal is real, so he takes the feeling with a grain of salt. After all, Lecter's presence makes him relax. The first bite of food, the battery buzz of spice, and then the floating feeling that heralds the visuals. He wants it. He wants Lecter.

Will focuses on the photographs. The newest scene is disgusting, but he's so used to the gore that it seems like a painting. He can barely empathise with the victims—only in the passion and the greed and the sophistication of the killer. Hannibal breathes, the air cold against his shoulder.

Will gives in. "Well, say you're right, then. He's ruined him. How's he going to put him back?

"The killer's going to make the muse love him. Not that it'll be much work."

"Love a murderer? Who can do that? Most people can't even manage sympathy."

"You can manage a world more than just sympathy," says Hannibal slyly. He's striking in the fluorescent lights, sharp contrast like black and white film. He has a suit on, and a rose in his buttonhole.

"Stop being so pleased with yourself," says Will. This Hannibal is cocky, mostly due to Lecter's stories about the semester when he became enamored with Florence on a school trip. They were there to learn about anatomy drawing from the old masters, he had explained, but instead, he learned about himself. "Just because I can emphasize, doesn't mean I can't draw a line. Even if it's a crooked line. You're just overconfident because some rude professor invited you to the opera."

"And then I had him for dinner," smiles Hannibal. "It was only fair."

"Had him *over* for dinner," Will corrects, annoyed. "Your English needs work."

Hannibal just shrugs his shoulders, smiling. "Maybe so."

"The more I learn about you, the more smug you get. How do I stop that?" Will turns over a page in the police report. "You could at least be useful and help me concentrate."

"Cutting back on drugs centers the mind, after the withdrawal period."

Will grits his teeth. "I can't exactly stop taking prescribed medication. Anyway, how would you know? Lecter was never an addict. Not the type."

Hannibal's mouth twists. "No," he agrees, his arrogance disappearing for a second. "Not him."

-

Lecter tends to visit him in a non-professional capacity on Sundays. It strikes Will as very appropriate; while the rest of the state runs to its churches and rests, he gets to sit in his room and let the Spring sun warm him as he eats. Their meals have migrated to a small table in front of the window, and Will likes to watch the cars and the people coming and going.

The doctor comes into the room at noon, setting down a small bag which clinks with metal and glass. Will is already sitting at the table, staring outside.

Lecter takes the dishes out. Today it's a tea spread, with finger sandwiches and cookies and petit fours. Will looks at Lecter's hands around the thermos as he pours the rich, dark tea into cups. Will stirs in a small teaspoon of the white crystals from the sugar bowl into his cup, but it doesn't sweeten the tea any, and Lecter has already put the bowl away before he can reach for more. He makes do with honey. The tea warms his stomach.

Lecter speaks first. "I thought we might talk about the latest case. Is it weighing on you?"

"All the cases weigh on me. Inhabiting this killer isn't doing me any favours."

"What do you mean?"

"He lives in me, or perhaps more accurately, I live as him. I know this aspect of him now. His M.O, his desire, his passion."

"You use the word passion." He sounds holy. Will could listen to him forever. "In the Bible, the passion of Jesus Christ refers to his suffering on the cross. The sacrifice and the agony of torture. That definition fell out of popularity. Now, passion means desire, heat, fervor. Tell me, Will, do you believe that this killer is tortured while he exalts in his tableaus?"

Will considers this. "He's tortured because he's alone. He's perceived, but not seen. I don't think he's solitary. In fact, I'm sure he's not. He has a job, acquaintances. He's probably well respected in his field, but he's desperate to find someone who accepts him entirely."

"Do you think he's achieving his goal?" Lecter's eyes are piercing. He wants to know this answer, wants it so badly that Will can barely get the words out of his mouth fast enough.

"No. He's still not being seen, or else he'd have stopped this murderous version of Picasso's blue period."

Lecter's brows lift twitch upward. "You consider his work art?"

Will backpedals. "He thinks it is. And I think what he thinks. Once he's caught, I'll be able to find the empathy line and cut it."

"Why not do that now?"

"Because if I do that now, we won't catch him."

They're both quiet for a little bit.

“It’s odd that you mention religion,” says Will, looking out the window. “This is like Sunday Mass for me. Every week, around the same time, we talk about how sin affects us. Very Catholic of you, doctor.”

“Am I the priest or God in your metaphor?”

Will can’t stop himself from smiling. He raises his teacup in a parody of a toast, and takes another sip. The world is starting to get a bit hazy around the edges.

Lecter tactfully changes the subject. “How will the murderer be caught, in your opinion?”

Will plucks the answer out of the air in front of him, as if Lecter provided it. “If his muse rejects him. He’ll kill the muse and that’ll be the last victim. We’ll be able to trace him from that. The biggest tableau will be for the muse, the most loving and elaborate one. He’ll try to showcase his potential, what could have happened, but he’ll kill out of disappointment.”

“It’s likely you’re right,” says Lecter, stacking the dishes.

Will leans gently back in his seat, his head lolling to the side. He feels warm and the air is vibrating. His teacup is empty.

Lecter’s voice reaches him in echoes. “Will. Will. You have his mindset. Would he tell the muse outright?”

The walls are dripping with paint. “He should try. Maybe the muse will call the cops and make my job easier for me.”

“But would he?” Lecter’s voice is so smooth. So convincing.

“Probably. But it wouldn’t be a confession of murder. It would be a love note.” Will is swimming in the dewy afternoon. He imagines red roses and calligraphy over a crime scene.

“He’s already leaving those, isn’t he though?”

“Oh, the tableaus? Yes. Yes, I suppose he is.”

Chapter 9

The nurses know Will. Receptionists know Will. Everyone in the hospital knows Will to some degree or another. He's become a permanent staple on the fourth floor. He wanders sometimes, listlessly, and after a while security just nods as he passes them by. He hears some interns talking about him once. *Mr. Graham from room 203? Yeah, they're waiting for him to die. Can't send him home either. Heart transplant isn't taking.*

It's not true, he thinks. What's not taking is reality.

After visiting hours end, the halls are quieter. He feels like a ghost, sometimes. He knows the layout by heart now, all the nooks where people will pass him by, all the linen closets, all the on-call rooms. His hallucinations wax and wane depending on the time of day. He thinks that he is one of them—a haunting, a ghost. Something everyone knows to avoid.

He spends time on the files that Jack Crawford hand delivers. They have stilted conversations over the bodies which cover Will's floor and that stare at them from the crime scene photographs. Crawford is ex-navy, he was stationed in Italy, his wife can't cook. Small talk swirls into awkward silence; when Will gives his professional opinion, the other man leaves. The newest file is very thin, unassuming in Crawford's large hand.

"Is that a new tableau?"

"No. Just a profile someone else worked up. We wanted to see what you thought of it."

"Oh."

Will knows, of course, that other people are working on the case, but the blunt acknowledgement of another mind looking at these murders stings. They feel private, like they're only for him to see. He suddenly understands private art collectors—that cold, triumphant urge to claim beauty. The jealousy and envy. This is his serial killer. This one he can catch. He feels faint.

Crawford looks at him. The deep crease in his forehead seems like a crevasse under fluorescent light, like someone took an axe to his temple when he was young.

"What's your prognosis?" Crawford asks, changing the subject.

"I could drop dead any second. As far as I can tell, the heart they put in me won't beat right. My blood pressure is abysmal. I think they're treating me for an infection right now, too." Will doesn't think any of that is exactly correct. He's only echoing the rumours he hears in the halls. Doctor Lecter tells him precious little about what is happening to him medically.

"You don't know?"

"I seem to have a new condition every few days. Can't keep track." According to the hospital gossip machine, this is true.

“Ah.”

They’re both silent. The buzz and beep of machines fills the space between them. Will thumbs through the file, skimming the labels and meticulously organized headings. It’s all slapdash assumptions filled with glaring inconsistencies about upbringing and education. He tries to be impartial, to read like a professor grading a paper, but he can’t. He’s jealous. He feels wronged.

“Technically, all of this is correct.” It’s not. “Whoever wrote this is a keen observer.” They’re not. “I would add this to the official profile.” He wouldn’t. The FBI doesn’t deserve to catch this murderer. He does. He’s the only one worthy of it.

Crawford gives him a cramped smile, and reaches for the file. His fingers brush over Will’s skin and he falters. Without asking, he slowly raises the back of his hand to Will’s forehead.

“You’re burning up. Do you have a fever?”

Will looks at him quizzically. “Mr. Crawford. Jack. I’m dying. A fever is expected.”

-

“Doctor Lecter.” Will chews the words carefully, rolls them around on his tongue. “Doctor Lecter, why do I have a fever?”

They are sitting over breakfast; Will on his bed, exhausted after a walk around the halls, Lecter in a chair. A light oatmeal sits between them, warm from the staff kitchen stove. There’s no meat in it, which is a rarity for Lecter, but it is delicious all the same. Will expects oatmeal to be bland and slimy, a reaction borne of years of eating it straight from the microwave when his father didn’t care to make breakfast, but this tastes more like a pudding than a punishment.

Lecter tilts his head. "Why do you think you have a fever, Will?”

"Because I feel hot. Warm. Too warm. It’s hard to think sometimes.” The blankets that sit around his knees feel suffocating because of the heat. He really hadn’t noticed until Crawford brought it up, but now the fever is constantly on his mind. He sweats through the sheets every night.

Lecter’s nostrils flare as he inhales. A thermometer appears in his hand.

"Lift your arm.”

The thermometer is cold against Will’s skin. They wait five minutes in silence. When Lecter takes the little metal tube back, his eyes widen a fraction. But instead of delivering the news that Will has a debilitating fever, he simply says the temperature is normal.

"Half a point higher than usual, but that may be due to environmental stresses. Nothing of note.”

"Liar.”

It’s a shock to them both. The word freezes them in their seats. Will breathes in, mouths the first syllable of an apology or an excuse, stops again. He can’t stop himself from a half smile though, an involuntary quirk of one corner of his mouth. The room is swimming again, the bitter taste of nutmeg—was that nutmeg?—from the meal coating his slippery tongue. He feels remarkably open, like he might say anything that’s on his mind.

"I’m sorry you feel that way.” Doctor Lecter’s voice is smooth and fluid, nothing that could be ever mistaken for clinical. His motions are panicked though, a controlled sort of panic, as he darts around his machines and punches in 911 on his pager.

"Don’t worry,” Will slurs. "I won’t tell.”

Hannibal is at his shoulder, a hand on Will’s hair, looking at Lecter like he hates him. Will tries to shape Hannibal’s name on his lips, but he can’t. He falls back onto the bed, loose-limbed and numb. He can hear his Hannibal shouting.

“—too high of a dose! And you call yourself a doctor—”

The world is too bright and he’s too hot.

“ —the hell do you think you are! In his condition—”

Will is floating in a stream. He wishes, drowsily, that Hannibal—that Lecter—was with him.

-

Will jolts awake in the bathroom. The lights are bright and fluorescent, the stalls are an ugly shade of red. He stumbles to the sinks, dizzy and disoriented. He grabs hold of the porcelain edges and tries not to vomit. His skin feels tight and alien, cold chills running down his arms and legs. He opens the tap. Running water feels good on his hands, reminding him of the stream, reminding him of Hannibal.

He splashes some on his face when a hand wraps around his neck. He feels breath on his neck, smells blood and saliva. It’s just a dream, he thinks to himself frantically, just a dream.

In the mirror, he sees Hannibal pressed against him, sixteen pointed antlers growing out of his temples. They multiply until a forest of horns criss-crosses behind him, brown like old bones. Hannibal’s face is pale and shining amidst it all, reverent and reeling. His eyes are like black holes.

“You are a muse,” whispers Hannibal against his cheek. His antlers wrap sweetly around Will’s skull, pressing tight. “I want to feast on you.”

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

> oh will, you're really in it now. endless love to @mxjules for being both an editor and a cheerleader.

They have him draw clocks. They have him repeat inane words back to them at regular intervals, and they check his cranial nerves three times over before they're satisfied. They say to thank God that Doctor Lecter noticed in time; that without him, he'd be raving mad. The interns whisper that he isn't going to make it another month. They say to swallow the anti-inflammatory pills, to sleep, to drink water. The fever burns through him. They put cold cloths on his chest and arms, they pump him full of medication and fluids, they check on him every four hours to make sure he's not in a coma. Will doesn't remember their names. He only has eyes for Lecter. Lecter, who treats him impartially when others are around, Lecter, who injects smaller and smaller doses of something or other into his IV when they're not, who eventually stops doing even that, who only sleeps in the chair by his bed, Lecter, Lecter, Lecter. Such a pretty liar.

He's no longer allowed to walk unsupervised. That stings worst of all.

The treatment for encephalitis, which is apparently what he has, includes a ridiculous amount of bedrest. Though it helps that he's tired, he deeply misses his long wandering walks around the ward. He wonders how many of those walks were imaginary. Doctors other than Lecter question him about hallucinations and delusions, and he walks around, under, and between their inquiries. He's exhausted and shaking. It would be too painful if Hannibal was only a dream, but the young man doesn't reappear. It's only Will these days.

Only Will and Lecter.

It seems that whenever Will closes his eyes in exhaustion, Lecter appears. In the early days, it was mostly during the night, neither of them conscious. Will would wake from a nightmare and see the curled up shape of Lecter on the chair in the corner. The doctor looks oddly vulnerable in sleep, the light of the city falling across his face, mouth open a little, the soft curve of his shoulder showing over scrubs. Sometimes, Will would look at the pulse thrumming in the hollow of his neck. As his mind becomes less and less foggy, Lecter materializes in the days too.

"What are you doing, Doctor Lecter?"

"Reading." His eyes don't leave the page.

"About?"

“I have a patient with a tricky injury. Looking for precedents.”

“Don’t you have somewhere else to be?”

“I could be in an on-call room. Do you want me to leave?”

Will pauses, disconcerted. “No,” he whispers. Lecter’s eyes flick up at him, then back down to the book.

And so it goes.

Will’s day rises and sets with Lecter’s constant presence. Lecter groggy and annoyed when his pager goes off at 3am, Lecter focused and sharp during the day shifts, Lecter quiet and thoughtful when the evening comes. He’s stopped sharing his meals with Will. Something about the withdrawal of that pleasantry worms into Will, makes him salivate, makes him feel crazy with need. It’s not that he wants Lecter, Lecter is secondary in this wild urgency to eat. The hospital meals do not satisfy it; he pushes half-full plates away.

“What do you want for your birthday?” asks Lecter. “It’s next month.”

His answer is immediate. “I want dinner.”

“You have dinner every day.”

Will grits his teeth. His longing for Lecter’s food has been growing unbearable.

“Dinner with you. Food you’ve made.”

Lecter gives him a short smile. “Alright. Perhaps you’ll be well enough to stomach it by then.”

The promise of that is enough until Lecter brings out a packed lunch on a quiet Tuesday afternoon and Will breaks.

“Please, can I have some of that?”

Lecter looks a little amused. “I’m sorry, Will. I won’t give you this. You don’t actually want it anyway.”

Will tries one more time and his voice is bent in half with begging. “Please, Doctor Lecter.”

“I won’t. It isn’t good for you, not in recovery. I knew that from the beginning, but it was tempting to share.”

“Please,” Will says again. “Please.” To his shame, his eyes fill with tears. He turns away in bed, facing the wall.

“I will not.” Lecter sounds taken aback. “I know it feels difficult, but you must refrain from eating what isn’t good for you.”

“I know it’s not good for me. I need it. Please.” He looks out of the corner of his eye at the doctor.

Lecter is silent. His face, for the first time since Will has seen it, shows more than a quiver of an expression. He looks completely unprepared for Will’s desperation. He clears his throat. “I’m afraid I cannot give it to you.”

“Then get out,” Will says quietly.

“Excuse me?”

“Get out! Get out of my room!” Will starts shouting and he can’t stop. “Get out! Leave! Go! Get the *fuck* out!” His voice cracks, he’s ravaging his vocal cords. He’s roaring something undecipherable. He didn’t know he could be that loud and he’s only getting louder. He’s wailing, like mourners do at funerals, when someone’s died. Everything hurts, everything fucking hurts. It’s like when he got stabbed. Every breath feels like fire.

Lecter walks out of the room, and someone else replaces him, someone else fills him with sedative, and Will sobs and sobs until the room fades away.

-

Over the next few days, Will goes through hell. His fever returns, his eyes water, he feels nauseous. He’s starving. It’s the encephalitis trying to come back, says some doctor. What did Lecter do to you, asks another.

“Nothing,” says Will. “I was just seeing things.”

That must be the right answer, because all he gets is a nod and more anti-inflammatory pills.

He’s restless, he can’t sleep. His muscles ache.

Hannibal comes back, just once, in the late shadowy eddies of an evening. Will can’t quite make out his face, or his shape, just his thick accented voice in the May air. The window is open, he can see through him.

“Oh, Will,” says Hannibal. Nothing else. It may have just been the wind.

-

Lecter makes the mistake of coming back into the room once to check Will’s vital signs. Will, torn between begging for food and screaming at the man to leave, only manages to make some sort of pathetic groan. Then, almost as if he had timed it perfectly to Lecter’s visit, he has a seizure.

Will wakes up with the taste of blood on his lips and stiff aching muscles. He feels remarkably better, just weak and confused, and his mouth is so so dry. He manages to lift a hand and smack it around the wall until he hits the nurse call button.

The nurse comes equipped with a paper cup of ice cold water. Will swallows down half and coughs. The nurse looks at his watch.

“Thank you,” Will stops to read the man’s nametag. “Thank you, Matthew.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“You had a seizure. Doctor Lecter helped treat that seizure. You’re stable. Doctor Lecter will come back tomorrow and debrief with you.”

“A seizure?”

“You’re on close watch if you have another one, but so far so good.”

Will’s quiet.

“Let me know if you need anything, okay? My name’s Matthew Brown, just give me a shout.”

“Okay, thank you.”

Will closes his eyes because something is making him think. He knows what this is. He’s seen it before, early in his childhood, when Beau Graham let a friend stay in his basement for a few weeks. He remembers the screaming and the begging and the sick sound of vomit against the cement.

“That’s what’s drugs looks like, Willy,” said Beau. “Makes good people go crazy.”

“Drugs do that?” said young Will, feeling almost physically ill.

“Withdrawal will kill you, no mistake. Just because he’s still alive doesn’t mean you’ll be if you try it.”

And that’s what it is. That’s what’s happening to him right now. He’s in withdrawal. But no. What a ridiculous thought. Will shakes his head gently, chiding himself. No track marks on his arm, no cravings, no signs.

Except the appetite for Lecter’s food. Except the needle taped to the crook of his elbow. The needle!

His eyes follow the tube coming from his arm, up and up, until they settle on the clear plastic bag of the IV.

Chapter 11

Will panics. For several, stricken moments, he is frozen in his bed. He has experienced fear before, but that was always as a result of something that he had done. Somewhere he had gone, something he had been caught doing. This is different. This is a betrayal. His breath is shallow, he is shivering. He forces himself to choke down air. Then, he gets up and walks out of his room.

The receptionist he finds will not cooperate with him. He probably looks insane, pale white and shaking. He is like mist in the air. The woman breathes on him and he dissipates.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Graham. Your doctor isn’t on shift right now.”

“I’m aware of that. Please give me the form.”

“I have to warn you that you are attempting to leave against medical advice and the hospital will not be held liable for any consequences, including—”

Will grinds his teeth and they are like pebbles in his mouth. “Yes, I understand. I understand. May I please have the form now?”

“I have to explain the risks first, Mr. Graham. It’s policy.”

She explains the risks. He agrees to them. He signs. She signs. They find a nurse to stand as witness.

-

He took a taxi from the hospital to his apartment. He had thrown his last twenty at the driver when the car stopped. Will walked to the door, fingers tight around the clutch of keys in his hand. They were slippery with his own sweat. The key turned easily in the lock, but it took his entire body weight to open the heavy door.

The building is old, small, cramped. It is painted a dark ugly green, and the ceilings are low on the steep staircases. The despair he feels when he looks up the flight to his floor is overwhelming.

For a moment, he second-guesses himself entirely. There is a concrete possibility, though he doesn’t know how concrete or how likely, that he is completely wrong. That he has just signed a death sentence by leaving the bleach white hospital bed to sleep in his grimy little twin bed. He feels bizarrely small in his own body.

He wishes, under his breath so that his rational side doesn’t hear him, that Hannibal was here. Not the Doctor Lecter that maybe-has, maybe-hasn’t drugged him, but the snarky mysterious man that walks through life with him. The past, never to become present. The hallucination.

Will is halfway up the stairs, panting. A cold sweat is building on his shoulderblades, on the small of his back. His vision flickers.

“I really hope I don’t have a seizure right now,” he pants, and his face crumples when he realizes who he’s talking to isn’t there.

He would give so much, so much, for the gentle touch on his hand, his back, the spit-shiny teeth in a grin, the ominous exhale on his neck.

There isn’t a handrail; his right hand is splayed wide on the green wall.

Every step is an effort. It was never this hard before, was it?

He is in his apartment. It smells like dust and rotting food, though he can’t fathom why. Pure instinctual habit forces him to lock the front door. In a soft green haze, he grabs a glass and fills it with water from the tap. He puts it on his nightstand.

He is in his bed. It is cold.

-

He sleeps, on and off, for days.

-

Will Graham wakes up alert. He feels like shit. His mouth is so dry that he cannot swallow. He is covered in his own vomit. He is, for the first time in a while, angry.

The first thing he does is drink water from the sink, like a dog, choking down the cold. He washes his face, his neck, his hands. He strips his clothes off of him, piling them by the door. He eats handfuls of whatever food hasn’t spoiled—mostly chips and olives—then orders a pizza. He boils water in a pot and shakes an entire box of spaghetti into it.

He is shaking so hard that he needs to sit down and close his eyes until the door buzzer shocks him onto his feet.

He eats two slices of pizza so fast that he has to run and throw up into the toilet. He spits yellow bile into the bowl. Brushes his teeth. Tries to eat again, slower this time. He drains the pasta and adds a jar of sauce, popping the seal of the lid with more effort than it should have required.

The apartment looks like a one-man tornado has been through it. There is shattered glass on the counter from an attempt to get water that he doesn’t quite remember, there are vomit stained clothes by the front door, there are crumbs from where he choked on the chips.

“I must smell disgusting,” he notes. The absence of Hannibal’s reply is loud in his ears. “Alright, be like that. I wonder if you’re only gone because of the state of this place.”

Will opens the windows, sweeps a little, and manages to throw his dirty clothes into a plastic bag. Then, he nods off. The smoke alarm wakes him up. He scoops up the top layer of

salvageable pasta and throws the pot in with his clothes.

He eats again.

He feels almost human.

-

The next day, he catches a glimpse of himself in the skinny mirror in his bedroom. Will has a fairly accurate idea of what he looks like inside his head. He isn't prone to embellishment, even in his imagination. The lack of mirrors in the hospital, aside from those in what he thinks were his dreams or hallucinations (what is the difference, really?), has not prepared him for what he sees.

Will looks fragile.

It's not that he's skin and bone. He's always been lanky, but laying in bed for months has given him some more softness. What shocks him is how weak he looks. His eyes are set deep into his face, swollen with sleep and sunk into their sockets. His beard looks like he's wearing a children's costume: unconvincing. His arms are ill-defined, slightly curving in at the bicep. His stomach slopes out but every one of his ribs is prominent.

He drags a finger along them as if they're harp strings.

"No wonder he…" Will cuts himself off, turns, and goes to the kitchen. He is too uncertain for blame. He cannot be sure if he'll survive if his anger lands on himself.

The next weeks are spent madly making his home and his body livable again. First, hesitant trips down the stairs to throw out the trash, then out of his building to the bodega across the street. Then the laundromat. Then the grocery store, after he hits his ridiculously low credit limit when paying the delivery driver.

He takes exhausted walks around the block, stumbling over his feet less and less.

He has never cleaned so vigorously in his life. He scrubs his fridge for the first time in four years, probably breathing in an unhealthy amount of mold. A solution of water and bleach leaves his fingers pruned and slippery, and every surface in his reach disinfected. He opens the windows in the morning, closes them only when the evening gnats and mosquitoes begin rising from the muggy air.

The thought of Hannibal at his side is like a cane that he leans on when he gets too tired.

When he is done, there is no outward sign that Will Graham has ever lived in the apartment. The clothes, the sheets, the books, all could belong to anyone. Satisfied, Will rehomes himself. A ceramic dog that someone got him as a joke sits on the windowsill. Books on criminal justice and insect activity lay on the dining table; his chipped coffee mug stains circles into the cover of one. A sepia photograph of him at fourteen in front of the woods by his childhood home.

His body, he cannot fix so quickly. There are still faint yellow marks on his arms, he is still weak, he still needs to sleep during the day. He still looks at himself in the mirror with apprehension. He still finds himself talking to Hannibal, into thin air. But there are no hallucinations anymore, and no desperate hungry cravings. The hollowness he grew around over the months has faded.

He calls Jack Crawford.

“I’m out of the hospital,” he says. “I’m ready to come in person, if I’m still needed.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> as always, i'm thankful to @mxjules for their genuine encouragement and constant patience. <3

Crawford had jumped to take him up on the offer of consultation.

Will bolts at the early alarm, makes a cup of coffee, and eats half a box of cold take-out jambalaya. The spring morning is already bright.

There is a nauseating need in Will's chest for some semblance of normalcy. Forgetting the past months would be bliss. That thought disperses any hesitations he may have of going back to his job. Throwing himself back into work, back into the mind of someone *else*, sounds like a reprieve.

After warming up his engine, which wheezes at being used for the first time in four months, he pulls out of the parking lot. There is a delicious sense of freedom in driving to the New Orleans Police Department. The windows are rolled down, and the humid breeze fights with his overgrown curls. Will makes a mental note to cut his hair with the kitchen scissors.

It is a relief to be able to make mental notes, to remember why he's making them. The leather of the steering wheel creaks underneath his grip when he thinks of *why* he wasn't able to before.

His days have become more and more chronological, contrasting against the months before.

His anger is a constant.

Rationality wins out, though. Who would believe a man crazed with encephalitis? The best case scenario would resolve in more testing; the worst, him in a psych ward. *No,* Will thinks, *the worst case scenario would be him under Lecter's care again.*

When he reaches the offices, he parks the car in his still empty spot.

The receptionist greets him with a surprised grin and makes some suggestion about telling his coworkers. He shakes his head, forcing the corners of his mouth to lift into a smile. He doesn't have any issue with the people he works with, but that doesn't translate into camaraderie. There isn't much of a market to be friends with the man who reflects a person's entire brain back at them.

Will only stops by his partner's desk. She leaps up and hugs him, then quickly backs away like he's slapped her. She asks if he's allowed to be back on his feet. He assures her that all is

well, all the while trying to stop his disgust from showing. He doesn't blame her—he *tries* not to blame her—but he also cannot forgive her for starting the chain of events that led to this monstrosity of a situation. She says something about how he's lucky.

"Be more careful next time, or the next person won't be as lucky as me," he jokes, but she just stares at him, lips parted in dismay.

He's halfway out the door when he catches her apology.

-

Will isn't sure where he's supposed to go, so he wanders down into the belly of the precinct until he hears Jack's voice coming from an evidence room. There are a few people inside; some, he does recognize as coworkers, others obviously transplanted into New Orleans. Their accents are slick, almost slimy, upper class East Coast. He knows that his own Louisiana twang will sound just trailer-park enough that they'll take him for inexperienced and prejudiced. More frustration lights in an already overwhelming bonfire of rage that Doctor Lecter has left him. He stands in the doorway, a little awkwardly, then clears his throat.

Jack notices him first.

"Alright everyone, listen up. This is Will Graham, our local expert on this case. He's doing this as a consultant, not a police officer, so pay attention."

Will stiffens. This is what he's wanted, it really is, but it's sour and heavy in his stomach. The prestige of working with the FBI is coupled with being an outsider.

"What are we looking at?" he asks. If nothing else, if he works, he gets paid.

The people in lab coats shuffle aside to let him look at the table. It's a collection of flowers, paired with photographs of where they were found at the scene.

"Is this a new one?" Will asks. "I didn't see the file."

Jack hands him a folder. While Will reads, everyone seems confident enough to continue the chatter he had interrupted. Will tunes them out, melts into the photographs.

One victim this time. *So alone after a series of tableaus with another.* Not visibly mutilated. *But look! The heart, the mind, all pierced.* Clothed in sheets, arranged like a toga. *A god*. Scattering rotting petals on the empty ground. Eyes physically moved to stare to his left. *A hunter. He does not accept that his prey is loose.*

" —Will!"

Jack is shockingly close to him, waving an impatient hand. "Are you awake?"

"Yes," Will fights the urge to smile. What a fucking relief, to drift away on his own accord, for his own reasons, to be able to come back easily with a simple reminder. The relief of not getting lost inside his own head is overwhelming. "Yes, sorry, I was just lost in thought."

“Care to share with the group?”

Will takes a breath, feeling it shudder with the adrenaline that the combination of death and relief has inspired in him. To the others, he must look scared. He only feels comfort. Will is too busy enjoying the buzzing under his skin to analyze it.

“He’s furious. Absolutely raging.”

The general confusion shows that nobody was thinking along the same lines as him.

“We thought this looked more calm. More *respectful.* That maybe this was our… golden ticket, I think Jack said.” The man who’s speaking has salt and pepper hair and a wide forehead, scored with the beginnings of wrinkles.

“I don’t think so. Look…”

There’s an awkward silence.

“Price. I’m Jimmy Price,” says the man.

“Look at his eyes, Price. They’re not closed. They’re looking away, towards where his…” Will doesn’t want to say lover. Will doesn’t *want* to say lover, he doesn’t want them to know that this is love, obsession, dedication, the likes of which he wants desperately.

Will doesn’t want to project his own thoughts onto the crime scene, which is something that has never been an issue until Lecter. Another stick on the pyre of rage against the good doctor.

Another awkward silence.

“Paramour?” supplies Price.

“Sure. Towards where his paramour has escaped him. He’s gentler when handling this victim because he’s still making self-portraits. He’s fashioned himself into a jealous, spiteful, and stubborn god. This is a warning.”

Jack interrupts, loudly. “So there’s a possibility the paramour was kidnapped and then escaped? What if this narrative is already in the past, and he’s just recreating what happened?”

“If this were performance art, it would happen in sequential stages, like clockwork. It would be logical, and the unsub would be easy to find because of it. There’s no pattern here. A good deal of it is planned, sure, but the subject is changing on the fly. Whatever is being illustrated is happening now.”

It’s not a particularly powerful observation, but there’s a quiet air of appreciation in the room.

It’s been so long since Will felt as smart as he does now.

It’s almost like a warm up case, a false scenario, a warning. It’s almost like it’s easy on purpose. A reassuring smile before fangs slip out from under the gums.

Chapter 13

Will's days are still temporally correct. He doesn't lose time, he doesn't sleepwalk, he doesn't hallucinate. But there is a delusion creeping on the edges of his mind, an obsession he indulges in because he can't help it.

Doctor Hannibal Lecter.

Something about it tugs at him when he looks at the blood splattered tableaus. A surgeon's wrist, carving, shaping. The instinct is there, barely, tugging behind his navel. *There is something to see here, do you feel it?* He ignores it, furious. It's thanks to the doctor that he can no longer trust his raw instincts, that he must back it up with something other than encephalitis riddled thought.

It's thanks to the doctor that he's different.

Will is feverish in his moments alone. *The monster, the killer, the artist, who is he where is he?* And in particularly dreadful minutes: *I want him. I want to see him, and then to watch the cherries of bullet holes open up on him.* And in the silent hours of the night, ones which he blocks off and pretends don't exist: *Oh Hannibal, I miss you.*

When he's thinking like that, about Hannibal, Doctor Lecter, there is nothing else in the world. His focus pinpoints like he's staring at the sun, watching the light wreak havoc on his retinas, the blue black dot against his vision when he looks away.

Lecter, the madman who drugged him.

Who stayed with him when he sleepwalked, who held his hand through the coma.

Lecter, who ruined his life.

Who kept him, who claimed him wholly and entirely. Who wanted him.

"How could you," Will cries to the wall, "how could you change me then force me to leave."

"Nobody forced you to leave," he mouths to himself, imitating Hannibal's voice. "I gave you a gift and you were the one who decided you must disappear."

He sometimes thinks of taking drugs, just for the ability to see him again.

Will looks up Doctor Lecter on his laptop and stares at the newspaper print photos, the awards, the opera donation recognition luncheons, the Linkedin page (making sure to never be signed in himself).

He already knew Lecter's face, but now he has it stamped on his brain. Just like the sun, when he stares at it too long and it's still there when he closes his eyes.

The faint blue-tinged afterimage is not enough.

-

The next murder comes a week later, in the sweltering late-May heat. When Will reaches the scene, the buzz of flies is loud against his ears and the copper stink of old blood makes him consider heaving his breakfast onto the asphalt. He must look a little woozy because Katz makes a concerned face at him and offers some menthol rub for him to put under his nose.

It only helps a little.

The tableau is a lot cleaner than the ones before, but the visceral horror of it only grows as Will approaches. It's a man on a padded operating table from a hospital: he is stitched from head to toe with neat sutures.

"All of his internal organs are gone," says Jack. "And the tongue. What is that supposed to mean?"

Will disregards answering in favour of his own question: "Where is that table from?"

"We're not sure. The serial number's been scratched off, and all the hospitals in the area use the same brand of table."

Something about it itches at Will though. He steps closer, walks around, trying to pinpoint what about the table is familiar. If he could only be allowed to lay on the metal surface, if only he could touch it, if only he could stick a hand in his own head and find the reason.

He starts to crouch down to take a look underneath, but pauses. The thick black strap has a piece of red electrical tape around it. One he'd picked at during his heart transplant.

Will feels dazed.

This is *his* surgical table. The one Lecter cut him open on. Understanding flashes.

He knows how to get Lecter, and how to get the killer at the same time. Two sick surgeons in one stone. Maybe they even know each other, met at some conference and shook hands, shared a patient. Maybe they shared a smile over in an OR, monster meeting monster.

Will stands.

"He's practicing," he recites, like he's reading from a script. "Look at these stitches. He's figuring out what to do to his muse once he finds him."

So far, so true. Not for long.

"I would look around for medical personnel discharged for malpractice. Someone older, maybe in his 60s, but strong and physically fit. And I would hurry."

Lies.

"Thanks, Will." Jack is already calling his research team.

Later, in his car, Will dials a number, reading it off of his medical records. The phone rings once, before someone picks up.

“New Orleans General Hospital. This is the reception desk. How may I help you?”

“Hi, how are you.” He doesn’t wait for a response. “Listen, I was hoping to talk to Matthew Brown. Is he on shift today?”

A pause.

“Yes, it’s urgent. It’s an emergency.”

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Matthew Brown is a good nurse.

He listens to Will carefully, and Will can feel his attention through the phone. Then, in a calm voice, he says that unless Will has a very good reason for asking him what he just did, he plans to personally call in a wellness check.

Will bristles at that. He is very very tired of not being taken seriously.

“I have reason to believe that I was unknowingly drugged. I don’t want to bring in the police, but I need to know if I’m crazy or not.”

He can almost see Brown’s eyes roll, but the voice on the phone remains professional.

“Sir, we keep careful track of every medication you were given. I have your records on file. In fact, you can request a copy of your records through the front desk. I hope you have a good day, now.”

-

Two hours later, an unsaved number calls Will’s cellphone. He picks it up, laying in bed, ready to hang up if he hears the grating voice of an automated telemarketer.

“Hi, hey, it’s Matthew Brown. Is this Will Graham?”

Will sits up straight.

“It’s me. What happened?” he asks. Surely something has happened.

“I got curious, sue me. I went into your records.” This is obviously not something that he should be able to do, and Will tenses.

Brown offers a flimsy excuse when the silence stretches to an unacceptable length. “I was your nurse, I still have access.”

Plausible deniability. Will can work with that.

“And?”

“And your doses are perfect. Absolutely perfect. Textbook.”

Will wonders if it’s too late to hang up and run before Brown calls in that promised wellness check. But Brown keeps talking.

“Your doses should have never been textbook. You were one of the most inconstant patients I’ve ever seen. One day you were fine, the other you were delirious with pain. Your pain medication should have been adjusted every damn day to compensate.”

Will swallows. “But it wasn’t.”

“But it wasn’t,” agrees Brown. “What I have are neat round numbers that do not line up with your recovery. Like here, the day of your seizure. I remember your doctor giving you gabapentin for it. I remember it clearly. But here it says you got pregabalin.”

“Oh my god,” says Will in a half-sob. Some part of him has been convinced that he made it all up, but here it is: an assurance that he does not belong in an asylum, in Brown’s raucous voice.

“It’s not proof of what you’re accusing him of, mind you. This is just proof that he’s been faking records. That type of shit happens when you forget to fill in paperwork.”

The silence after that sounds annoyed.

“I should really report him,” says Brown, “But everyone likes him and I think he’ll get off with a reprimand or a suspension for bad recordkeeping. Maybe nothing at all, if he cites a lack of sleep for misremembering.”

Will is quiet.

“So I’ll do it. I’ll look into Lecter for you.” He can hear Brown’s smile through the phone. “I don’t like that bastard anyway.”

I like you better is unsaid but loud and clear. Will chooses to ignore it.

“Thank you. Thank you.”

-

“Holy shit,” Brown whispers into the phone. “Holy shit.”

It’s night on a Friday a few days later, and Brown had double checked the schedule to ensure that Lecter was neither on shift nor on call. He had a friend in HR, who looked into the registry to find the combination for Lecter’s locker.

“What is it?” Will asks. “What do you see?”

“Baggies of powder. Morphine, too, hospital morphine. He’s been stealing morphine, how the fuck has he been doing that? A scalpel. Suture kit.”

Will feels as though he’s been doused in ice water. Lecter was confident that nobody would suspect him, that Will wouldn’t tell anyone about what had happened. Confident enough to store the evidence of his crimes in his damn work locker.

There was no way that confidence was not misplaced. There was danger here.

“Brown, please get out of there. Report him.”

“No, no, just a minute, I need to close the locker. Hey, I’m going to hang up and I’ll call you back once I’m out of the hospital, okay?”

“Okay,” says Will. “Okay, just please leave. Don’t try to confront him.”

“I won’t.”

He will. Will knows it like he knows a crime scene. There is something wrong with Matthew Brown, something that makes him agree to look through the lockers of his colleagues, to offer help to someone obviously drugged, to look through patient records he *definitely* had no business looking through.

Will breathes in. Brown hangs up. Will catches his breath and screams with his teeth clenched tight.

-

It’s a Monday when Jack calls him in, urgently, to look at a body.

“I think it’s the Sculptor,” says Jack, finally giving in to the name that the gossip rags call the murderer who makes the tableaus. “Come confirm.”

When Will pulls up in his car, he gets out, and walks to Jack’s wide back. He glances past Jack’s shoulder and a shudder passes through him.

His body knows it before his brain does. As tech begins to lift the head of the body, Will freezes. He feels his eyes widen, his lips part. Before he even sees the face of the victim, everything clicks. It's as loud as a shot. He follows the trail of smoke to the gun, and finds Hannibal holding it.

Will’s lips part, and he almost calls out to him.

He looks at Will for a split second before he and the smoke wisp away.

The truth lays mangled in the space that he leaves behind, unwanted.

After the anger, the despair, the pretending, Will is shocked to find himself perfectly calm. There is no rage left to feel. After all, he wanted this, didn't he? Someone to match him, someone to obsess over him, want him, animalistic and elegant and dirty. His tormentor and his escape are one and the same, and he deserves this, oh he deserves this. He craved this. He's getting what he has wished for. He thinks that it took far too many bodies for him to see the obvious, but he's glad that he's finally caught up.

The playing field is leveling out.

Will looks at Matthew Brown, broken and battered and bloodless, *caught*, and wonders if that's a harbinger of his own future. And then, idly, which one of them will taste better on Doctor Lecter's sweet manipulative tongue.

Chapter End Notes

IT'S HAPPENING! WILL FINALLY GOT A CLUE! ARE WE ALL EXCITED?

Chapter 15

The day after Will recognizes Brown's body is spent mostly in his apartment. He padlocks the windows, and buys a second lock for the front door. There is nothing he can do about the sliding glass door to his balcony, so he settles for moving his couch in front of it.

Will feels a thin trickle of fear, as though dripped into his blood intravenously. He tries to force it away, telling himself that Lecter has no way of knowing that he was working with Brown at all. In fact, it would have been ridiculously stupid to have killed Brown if that was the case. Will would have connected the pieces. Will would have told Jack.

Will winces at the fact that he has not yet told Jack.

He takes two aspirin before going to bed, trying to ward off a building headache. He falls asleep as soon as he curls up into his sheets. He sleeps, dreamless, not noticing the noise of someone coming into his apartment through the balcony, the whir of the sliding door. He does not notice someone sitting in his armchair. He does not feel the gentle touch of fingers against his hand. He does not hear the crunch of his cellphone, or the snip of electrical wires severing his internet.

When he does wake, in the morning, it's to the sound of a cordless drill, which is in the finishing stages of flipping his doorknob so the keyhole is on the inside.

He opens his eyes just in time to see Doctor Lecter consider a small key, put it in his mouth, and swallow.

As soon as Will's brain processes what's going on, he throws his covers aside. They hit the wall, and when Lecter's eyes flick to follow the movement, Will leaps towards the kitchen. His apartment is a studio, and the stove is only a few feet away from his bed. Will slams against the counter, his hand reaching for where he knows the knives are, eyes on Lecter. His fingers scrabble against an empty knife block.

He looks around him for anything sharp, but the kitchen has been carefully emptied of anything that can do real damage. Will grabs the knife block, which is heavy enough to hurt if thrown correctly.

He whirls, panting, and Lecter is already coming at him.

Will shifts so he's standing sideways and starts to swing the block, like he's swinging a baseball bat, but it's too late. They collide.

Lecter is warm and strong, and his nose is hard against Will's elbow as they fall. The knife block hits the floor and slides out of reach.

Will's arms are pinned, but he's laying on his side, which can't be comfortable for Lecter. This is an advantage, because when Lecter puts his hand down on Will's shoulder to adjust, Will bites it hard, and simultaneously rolls, loosening Lecter's grip and pushing him off.

In fiction and in movies, it's always portrayed as deceptively easy to bite chunks out of other people. It's not. Will's teeth leave a white ring of marks, already turning red, but he didn't draw blood.

Lecter gets up, but isn't expecting the knife block that Will throws at his head.

–

They fight like wildcats for the first hour. There isn't an inch of Will's apartment that they haven't covered, exchanging punches that begin harsh and solid and transition into something like caresses as they both grow tired.

Will locks himself in the bathroom, and Lecter tries to break in. Will grabs the lid off the toilet tank, ready to attack should Lecter take the door of its hinges. The gap under the door is large enough that Will can see his shadow. When that seems to recede, he lays down to look at what Lecter is doing. Lecter's maroon eye meets his own, and Will jumps back as if shocked by electricity.

"Fuck off," says Will. "Leave me alone."

"No."

Will quickly stands up, unlocks the door and slams it open, hoping to hit Lecter hard. It doesn't work, and the fight begins again, back into the kitchen.

–

Will dodges a pot, but falls against the wall in his attempt. This is the latest in a series of objects that he and Lecter are throwing at each other from across the room, like a demented game of dodgeball. If Will's clock is right, an hour and a half has passed since Lecter swallowed that key.

He lets himself sit on the floor against the wall.

He laughs.

Lecter's expression would have been the same had he declared a passion for juggling and the intent to away to the nearest circus. This inspires another fit of laughter.

"This is absurd," says Will. "Totally ridiculous. You see that, right?"

Lecter sniffs. "I see no such thing."

"Come on," Will goads. "You're a murderous surgeon. I'm an experienced cop. We're both capable of taking each other down within a few minutes. And here we are throwing kitchenware at each other like divorcees. And we're *missing*."

Lecter breathes out of his nose sharply, mouth twitching into a smile.

"Perhaps we don't want to accidentally hurt each other," he suggests.

Will chokes on his own spit, and Lecter's responding chuckle is a white flag in the air.

The doctor crosses the room, cautiously, then sinks to the floor next to Will. The tension makes casual conversation impossible. They sit, exhausted, both panting. The minutes pass in a dazed kind of way, and the motes of dust that are illuminated in the late afternoon sun distract from the dents in the floor and the shattered plate. One of Will's dog figurines is missing a head.

Will is overheating and in desperate need of a drink of water.

When he shifts to stand up, Lecter immediately tenses, metaphorical hackles raising.

"Water?" Will asks.

"Yes. Please."

Will gets two mismatched glasses from the cupboard, and moves to fill them at the tap. He returns to the doctor with barely cold water; Will expects him to reject it, but Lecter drinks half immediately.

Will remains standing. His stance over Lecter, the power of it, the catharsis, is intoxicating. The sudden reversal of their roles feels satisfying. He hasn't even touched his water, and Lecter has accepted that Will would not poison him at this moment.

"Thank you," whispers Will.

"What are you thanking me for?"

He had meant for the trust that it took to drink from the cup, but he realizes that there is another thing he wants to acknowledge.

"For my love letters. I saw you in each one." Lecter brings himself up to his full height, surprise gentle at the corners of his eyes. He looms, terrifying, but Will just looks up at him placidly. Lecter doesn't seem to know what to do with that reaction.

Then, an afterthought, leaving Will's mouth like a prayer. "I see you now, too. No need for the posturing. Or the pot-throwing."

He hopes the last will elicit a smile, and it does. Lecter's face doesn't change, but he relaxes his shoulders and tilts his head, and Will knows a smile when he sees one.

Lecter's lips part, tremble, as if to speak, but instead he sips at his water. His eyes meet Will's over the rim, and the contact is heady, bloody, paralyzing.

How delicate, this thread of connection, how beautiful, how thin the spider silk bridging them. How precarious.

"Do you have a first-aid kit?" asks Lecter, breaking the moment.

"An old one. You might have to improvise."

They end up in the bathroom again. At first, the tension is taut and they both attend to their own wounds. Then, as Will tries to blot blood from the back of his head with wet toilet paper and keeps missing, Lecter gently takes the paper from his hand and does it for him.

He secures a bandage with some gauze around Will's head. Will smears ointment onto the scratches on Lecter's arms. Lecter sits on the bathroom counter, and Will wraps an ace bandage around his ankle. It is swollen, but not badly so. Lecter pops Will's dislocated pinkie back into place, which causes Will to slap him. Lecter slaps him back, and it seems like the fight is about to start again, but Will just turns to the first-aid kit in search of tape to immobilize his injury.

When the offending finger has been taped to his ring finger, he turns his attention to the bruise of Lecter's arm. It sits on the outside of his wrist, a circle of dark red teeth marks surrounded by purple. There isn't much that Will can do about that, but they've addressed everything else.

"Leave it," says Lecter. Will remembers, with a jolt, Hannibal's youth when he first met the hallucination. There had been something about teeth in that dream, loss and milk teeth. He runs his tongue across the back of his own teeth, looking at the damage he can do with them.

Lecter sitting on the counter is endearing. He reminds Will of his Hannibal.

It is strange to feel this way, considering they had spent the morning aiming to kill, not injure.

There's nothing to do about a bruise, and it really is the least of what they have done to each other. But Will can't stop seeing young Hannibal in Lecter, so he brings Lecter's arm up and brushes his lips to the injury. It is short, perfunctory, and not romantic in the least.

"There," says Will, channeling his father from when he was young and had bruised himself or skinned his knee. "There, all better."

If Lecter had looked at him affectionately before, it is nothing compared to this.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> okay, full disclaimer, these characters are no longer under my control and i have no idea why they are doing what they are doing. i thought they were going to get along, and now they are not. i thought they might have a nice little meal, and they did not. we only have three chapters and an epilogue left, and i have no idea how they're going to behave. will's having a mental health crisis, as usual, so he's unpredictable and not entirely comfortable in his brain; hannibal is younger and basically fresh off his melodramatic florence murders and not as sophisticated as he is in the show (i assume he has not met bedelia and curbed his more ugly impulses yet). anyway, have 1500 words of manipulative bullshit. all my love.

A college girl Will met at a party once told him that he didn't suit a June birthday, that he was too dark and sulky to be born in the summer months. She then vomited on his shoes. He had thought about it though, in a passing sort of way, about whether or not he was expelled into the world at the wrong time in the wrong place. He ultimately decided that the answer was no. June is warm. June is when the fishing is good, when the ocean water is silky, splashing over the shallows. June reminds him of shimmering asphalt in the heat.

He can't enjoy this June in that particular lazy sunsoaked way. This June is sweltering hot, the windows are shut tight, and the key to the door is likely lodged in the intestines of the devil that lives in his small apartment.

At least the devil is one he knows.

The rest of that first day that they spend together is tense as a fist. The moment of tenderness was too fleeting to last.

Will startles when Lecter lays down on the couch, icing his ankle, reading one of Will's few books: an antique guide to fly-tying. He flinches every time a page turns. Lecter isn't immune to the atmosphere. His eyes flick to Will every few minutes, and when Will rises to get another glass of water, he actually puts the book down and his eyes stalk Will from bed to sink and back to bed.

The apartment is dead silent. Will's ceiling fan is working overtime, but already there is a light sheen of sweat on both of their foreheads.

Will, forgetting that he had put padlocks on the windows, goes to open one, fails, curses. He starts towards the balcony; Lecter is beside him almost immediately. Will makes a face, looks away, and slides the screeching screen door into place after opening the glass one. There is a

breeze, and though the screen muffles it, the apartment inhales a draft. The air is cool and salty against his face, armpits, and the backs of his knees.

He's hungry, and he's afraid of the empty feeling in his stomach.

His eyes flick to the fridge, and the shards of glass on the floor in front of it. They hadn't cleaned up after their fight. Will wonders absently if the neighbours below him are out. Someone must have lodged a noise complaint. Then again, he wouldn't have.

His eyes slide to the fridge again, and Lecter notices. The doctor doesn't say anything, but shifts his stance a fraction, shoulders tilting.

"Lunch?" asks Will, finally.

"Oh, I had a most filling breakfast."

Bastard. Will takes a perverse satisfaction in the inevitable fact that the key has to come out of Lecter one way or another. Painfully. Preferably with Will's hand, bloody and glistening, rummaging in his stomach.

Will walks to the freezer, careful of the glass, hoping for a frostburnt bagel to toast. When he opens the door though, the shelves are filled with brown butcher paper, tied with kitchen string. Small handwritten labels boast dates. Will turns to Lecter, not because he's terribly shocked, but so he can see the expression that he knows is unfolding behind him. Arrogant, smug, expectant.

Will debates a hunger strike for a split second.

Then he closes the freezer door and crouches down to open the fridge. Carrots, tomatoes, broccoli, and ginger stare him in the face. Where the fuck is his three days old take-out? How did he sleep through all of this being moved into his house?

He closes that door too, then starts going through his cupboards until he finds, behind a stack of gifted artisan pasta from three Christmases ago, a package of Twinkies.

Lecter's face when he bites into one almost makes the whole ordeal worth it.

-

The Twinkies don't last, and they are truly disgusting, so when Lecter rises and begins sweeping the kitchen, Will doesn't object. He watches Lecter from above a page in his book. For such a large man, the grace in his movements informs Will about how he kills. Methodical, planned, he knows that already. But the movements of sweeping, the meat defrosting, the sharpening of a knife, the bowls out for mise en place, this is all new.

Will half closes his eyes, imagines the same actions under a different light, a different day. A hunt, a catch, a butchering: very delicate when seen from the side.

Reality hits when Lecter unwraps the brown paper. Will sees the red, the drip of condensation onto the counter. All he can hear is the scream of the dying man, all he can hear is the crying

of a little girl (why a little girl?), all he can see is an open mouth, teeth smashed beyond recognition.

A murder is easy to romanticize. Thousands of people do it, imagine it, think that it isn't that difficult. When you don't see it, when you only see the aftermath, it's easy to get desensitized. But this is only the middle of what happens to Hannibal Lecter's victims: a person, a human being, reduced to pork, mutton, chicken, tears of blood-water wetting the linoleum. Then, the flush of water, a life turned to excrement.

He bolts to the bathroom.

He throws up. The fake vanilla tastes so bad coming up that he gags, once, twice, spits into the bowl. His forehead is terribly cold, his back sweating. The thought of that drop hitting the counter and heaves again.

He scrambles up, panicked, disgusted, *enthralled*, just a little, immediately disgusted at being enthralled. The drywall is chalky against his hands.

The sound of the toilet flushing is loud as he leaves the bathroom., which only makes him heave again. Will runs to the front door and turns the knob one way, then the other. He starts pulling at the knob, pushing, and steps back to slam his shoulder into it.

Then, he's on the floor. It happens so quickly that Will didn't realize it happened at all. One moment he's about to break into freedom, the second his cheek is against the rough rug.

The kick to his stomach is entirely unexpected, and hurts so much more than it should. It knocks all the air out of his lungs. Will knows the trick to getting your breath back – breathe out instead of in – but he can't manage to do it.

Lecter lifts him into his arms while Will is still gasping. He carries him over to the couch, sets him down, and disappears to the kitchen.

Will catches his breath after a few minutes, but the pain and the fear cements him to his place. The smell of caraway and cardamom fills the apartment, and Will still can't move. His brain is overridden by the conviction that if he moves, he will be hurt. That if he moves, he will become a bolus of meat in Lecter's mouth, a mush of protein in his stomach.

There's an edge of a thought in his mind: that he is easily tamed, that he could become docile over time. This makes him scared. There is a hint of a thought in his mind: Lecter would never want him if he was docile. This makes him… he doesn't know what emotion that invokes.

The disgust washes over him, leaves him, comes back again. His empathy doesn't know who to target, the line he's drawn in the sand is long gone. He feels everything, everything.

Lecter appears over him, vampiric. The silence of fear is a balm.

"It's time to eat. I've set the table. Please join me."

Not enough of a balm to get rid of the revulsion. "No."

Lecter slaps him. It stings, but it isn't as bad as it could have been.

"That was rude. Let's try again. Dinner is served. If you are not hungry, it would still be polite to sit at the table."

"No, thank you."

This time, the slap makes Will's ears ring. He can't hear anything Lecter says after it. When Lecter lifts his hand again, Will bends a little.

"No, wait. I couldn't hear that. Repeat yourself." A pause. "Please."

"I said, please come to the table."

Will tightens his lips. Stands. Walking is difficult, but Lecter has an arm around his waist and brings him to the chair. He sits on the opposite end.

"Due to recent events, I have revised the menu. Tonight's salad is vegetarian."

An elaborate kale salad stares Will in the face. The realization that his stand-off was, essentially, for absolutely nothing gnaws a pit in his stomach. He looks at Lecter, and knows that Lecter has done this on purpose.

It's–

It's actually a little funny. It's manipulative, but also obviously meant to be a joke.

Will exhales roughly through his mouth, an echo of a laugh, and lifts a fork. "I sometimes wish I had met you when I was younger," he says after the first mouthful of leaves. The dressing is tangy, and he almost throws up again. The empathy he felt to the victims is further away now, though, and he swallows it down. "I'd be able to keep up with your lies disguised as truths. The salad is vegetarian, the sauce is not, all that."

Lecter's expression doesn't change. "A man doesn't tend to like to be called out on his faults, Will."

But Will is tired, and he's hungry. He takes another bite. It hurts his throat as it goes down.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> this is the beginning of the end! if you have theories or questions, tell me now! the next chapter is the only one i'm actively writing, the rest is set in stone. i'm very excited to hear what everyone thinks :)

After that, it's gentler. They settle into a bit of a routine, which is surreal, but also soothing. Lecter makes breakfast, Will does the dishes. No bones had been broken, but Lecter makes an herbal soak for his ankle, and sets some aside for Will's little finger. Will's head heals. The freezer slowly empties, Will doesn't ask questions. He suspects that once the last of the meat is gone, Lecter will do something to him. He doesn't even want to think what that something might be.

Lecter reads out loud in the evenings, very quietly.

He's reading a collection of Grimm's fairy tales in French, which is definitely not Will's, when he shuts the book and asks a question.

"What?" Will had been dozing on the couch.

"Would you ever want to hunt with me?"

Will isn't quite sure what to say, so he settles for a non-answer: "What sort of a question is that?"

"I mean it."

Will stares up at the ceiling, down again at his feet.

"Tell me, Will, haven't you hunted before?"

"If you're asking me if I'm a killer, the answer is no."

"Strictly no?"

"Never."

"Not even in your youth?"

Too young, no support system, she killed herself in the woods…

Will looks at Lecter, brows furrowed together. That hallucination, those dreams, all with Lecter in them. He knows, instinctively, that Lecter thinks himself a god; wonders if he is right after all — a dreamwalker, a shapeshifter. A flicker of awe, terror, whatever it was he felt when he first saw the doctor in the dewy sunlight of the staircase, as he was lifted up from his wheelchair and onto the cold cement.

The answer, of course, is mundane.

“You talk in your sleep.”

Will mentally rears back, prickling. “You mean I talk when I’m in a drugged stupor, doctor.”

Lecter shrugs. “They are often one and the same in hospitals.”

“Did you talk back?”

“Sometimes. A great deal of the time.”

It makes a little more sense now, that Will knew so much about Lecter without really knowing him at all.

“You held my hand while you talked.” It’s very dry, the way he says it. A fact. It means more than he expresses, that soft weight of a hand when nobody else wanted to sit by his side.

“Sometimes,” Lecter says.

“A great deal of the time,” Will says.

They look at each other. The kitchen light flickers.

-

“I’ve seen someone die. I didn't even see her, I heard her. I didn’t kill. I was fifteen. A girl went into the woods behind my house. I followed her. She hung herself.”

It’s breakfast the next day. Will hadn’t dreamed at all. He woke up with his back aching, from the couch he had slept on. Lecter was in the bathroom, the water was running. His bed was made. There was something so painful about the severe creases, the pillow tucked underneath the blanket. Lecter was honest, but he lied in his honesty. His actions told more truth than his mouth did; in that blanket was a childhood, a boy, and something terrible that had happened to that boy.

Inexcusable, thinks Will. *Indefensible*. And at the same time, a pull to stroke someone’s hair. To tell a child that it would be all right in the end. That what happened wasn’t its fault, that all that mattered was how it lived its life after.

Hannibal Lecter had butchered that life, destroyed that child, turned it into a serial killer. He needed to be locked away, like he had locked Will away. He needed to be helped, like that girl needed to be helped.

Will can't help the impulse to touch his cheek, to ask what happened. To know the answer would be true and untrue: *I happened*. To know that the blame was equally distributed in Lecter's mind: that the event and himself were one and the same. Will longs to rip the two apart, to see the viscera of the conjoining, to see the old stitches. To see the teeth that the tumour had grown, the *teeth*!

Lecter replies to his words, or maybe to the expression on his face. "But there was blood. You did mention it."

Will frowns. "I didn't see it happen. I only heard her scream for help. She was choking to death. It wasn't even a scream, really." Then, viciously, defensively: "You're mistaking your experience for mine."

He had wavered. He had watched her go further and further. He had walked down the rotting porch steps when he heard her.

He had tried to save her in the way they taught him at school: tell a trusted adult. A flip phone in his hand, shaking.

Lecter shifts back in his chair. "You had said there was blood. On your hands. You said it repeatedly."

"Metaphorically, Doctor Lecter. I didn't run to help her. I called 911." It had sounded like a wail, like a ghost. Will had been terrified, dialling too many nines at first and having to start over. He sometimes thinks that it wasn't his hesitation to stop her that killed her, it was his trembling hands unable to dial 911.

"And she died." Lecter's voice is heavy.

"Yes. She died. Sorry to disappoint."

She had died, and he had cast his empathy out to find someone else to follow, someone sad, someone he could help. He convinced himself that it was so that next time he could help. But without a focus, everyone else's emotions were too much to bear. An obsession with death, with pain, with all the emotions that beat at him from every direction. He eventually learned how to draw the line in the sand, them versus him.

"I'm not disappointed." But he was. Will had felt it. "What happened after?"

"The rest of my life." *Unlike the rest of yours, which you cultivated and raised around the thing that happened to you. But what happened to you?*

"Do you not think it changed your life, then?"

"In a sense, but not really. It sounds horrible, but…" Will pauses, shakes his head. "I don't think it will sound horrible to you. It's not even that bad. Honestly, I haven't really thought about it. I dream about the scream sometimes, and I think about the girl, but I didn't know her. She didn't change me."

He had changed himself, after her.

Lecter looks dissatisfied, but Will doesn't know what to do about it. "I can't do anything about what happened. What were you expecting to hear?"

"I thought," says Lecter, "perhaps we may have shared some childhood experiences. I see I was wrong."

"The milk teeth thing?"

Lecter flicks his eyes to Will's. He's startled, just a little. Coldly furious, but too sad to do anything about it. "Yes. The milk teeth thing." Will can hear his teeth grind from across the room.

"Well, she didn't change me. Not like yours changed you. Maybe you can change me instead."

That was a dangerous, and inelegant, string of sentences. Will doesn't even know if he means it. He almost apologizes, almost takes it back, but thinks that might be in poor taste.

-

That night, Will lays awake in bed. Lecter is in the kitchen, sweeping the floor (a cannibal, sweeping!) from dinner. It had been beautiful that night, a cut of meat in red sauce, that artisanal pasta from Will's pantry, parsley, all of it pressed against the roof of his mouth. Will had offered to help with the cleaning, but Lecter sent him away to the bed.

The fact that the studio is so open means that Will can see Lecter from under his sheets, behind the counter that separates the living and sleeping area from the food. He can hear the clatter of a dish or two, the tap squeaking, the quiet but unmistakable buzz of a phone.

Will holds still. He hasn't heard that sound since Lecter stole his phone (and his laptop, and everything else connecting him to the outside world): Will had assumed that he destroyed it, but maybe not.

He can see Lecter begin to turn towards him, and closes his eyes immediately. He dares open his eyes a fraction thirty seconds later. Through static blur of his eyelashes, Will can see Lecter pick the phone out from a bag of flour, possibly the last place Will would have looked. It's safe in a ziplock bag. Lecter checks the notification. It's not Will's phone, not the right colour. So, it's Lecter's. So, it's a way to call for help.

Maybe Will wants to be changed, though. Maybe he should ignore the lifeline, and give himself up to whatever comes next. The bass of Florence, the ancient energy of it. That soft weight of a hand in his as he rests, looking out at the Duomo.

Maybe he should get up and call Jack.

Maybe he should wait to see Hannibal's offer.

Beverly Katz, whenever she found evidence on a crime scene, would say "Gotcha".

Will breathes out. *Gotcha.*

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

> hi everyone! a few IMPORTANT notes before this chapter. firstly, oh WILL! D: why do you do these things? secondly, oh HANNIBAL you stupid proud son of a bitch, can you be any more obtuse? (to be fair, will is not helping much).
>
> secondly, in case you don't know, october is midterm and essay season for university students, so this month is insane for me because i also work for three organizations on top of five classes. so, what does this mean for the (nonexistent) update schedule? luckily for you, it means i have to schedule my writing time out to the minute (for real. to the minute.). that means the last two chapters will come out on the fifth of October and then the seventh of October because after that i have six papers, two group projects, and four midterms all due within three weeks.
>
> stay tuned <3

The morning comes gently. Will almost forgets that he knows about the phone. They don't talk about yesterday's failed conversation.

They eat breakfast together: yogurt and muesli. The pantry is emptying, and there is very little room for elaborate meals, except for dinner.

Lecter sketches a Florentine street. Will looks over his shoulder.

"I'd like to visit Florence," he says.

"How do you know it's Florence?" asks Lecter.

Will looks at him, shakes his head fondly.

"Of course, it's Florence. It's *you* ."

Lecter has a way of looking at Will after he says things like that. If Will didn't know better, he would say that it's a kind of love.

-

What does Lecter do with the things he loves?

-

It's the last week of June, five days before his birthday.

The freezer has only four brown paper packages left inside.

What will his birthday dinner be? A shared kill, or himself?

It's a countdown to reincarnation. Or rebirth.

Only a few days left to change his mind. He still has an out. He dwells on that option.

-

He consumes them so the world can't touch them.

-

Will wakes up early and makes breakfast, tip-toeing through the kitchen. It's a gesture of goodwill (eggs and asparagus and sausage from the fridge, not the freezer). It's an act of espionage, checking to see if Lecter can sleep through the noise.

He hums a Clash song, quietly, about the volume he thinks he'll talk to the operator.

Lecter doesn't rouse.

Will doesn't know what to do about that. He doesn't know what to do.

He starts the song over, singing out loud. The Clash was his favourite when he was a teen. He's looking at the couch, where Lecter's neck is long and white against the fabric. *Darling, you gotta let me know. Should I stay or should I go?*

Lecter opens his eyes and smiles at him. Vampire fangs.

Will can't help it. He just can't. Line or not, his empathy can't really be contained in the face of so much warmth. He smiles back.

-

What a beautiful thing, to be loved like that.

-

Lecter serves what he calls pig's brain soup. Will can't eat it.

He excuses himself. Lecter is gracious about it.

"You ever wanted to do that to me?" asks Will over tea.

Lecter glances at him and shrugs good-naturedly.

-

What an awful thing, to be loved like that.

-

Will dreams of that scream, for the first time since the hospital. He wakes with a start, looks over at Lecter. One meal left.

If they get caught, he will never see Lecter again and he'll be institutionalized. Maybe they both deserve to be institutionalized.

If he gets Lecter caught, he might get to see him from time to time.

No, that's madness.

But it's a madness that takes hold. Besides, it's the right thing to do. Call 911. Tell a parent or a teacher. Stop, drop, and roll. Stranger danger.

Don't follow the girl to the woods, don't follow the madman to Florence: stay safe, call for help.

Hannibal Lecter has made you eat people. Then, the shock. Hannibal Lecter hasn't *made* him do anything. There was never a consequence for not partaking. There wasn't even the threat of one. There was only violence when he tried to leave.

Will has done all this of his own volition. Being drugged doesn't count, he can usually see through manipulation, and he has done this all himself.

That thought is unbearable. It's unconscionable.

Will slides his feet to the kitchen, fishes out the ziplock bag, and presses the power button. He swipes to the emergency call screen and dials. Too many nines.

It's like that time in the woods, all over again, leaves under his feet and a phone in his hand.

He's a child again. He's heard a scream (he is the scream). He's calling for help. A trusted adult (he wants Hannibal, he wants Hannibal, he wants Hannibal).

"911. What's your emergency?"

He gives his address. It takes a while to track where a phone call comes from, and now that he's decided that he can't live with Lecter he wants to get away as quickly as possible.

But he can't tell the truth. The pause lengthens.

"Sir? Is there someone in the room with you right now?"

He hesitates long enough that it dooms him. There are quick footsteps behind him.

Lecter snatches the phone away from him, and knocks him to the floor. Will wants to scream, but fear has overtaken him. He thinks that maybe he's hyperventilating.

“I’m sorry, I was trying to assess my patient. I’m Doctor Hannibal Lecter. I was checking in on an outpatient and he has fallen and hit his head. He has recently had a heart transplant and I see evidence of other recent falls. Please send an ambulance. No, he’s not conscious. Yes, I’ll be present at the scene.”

He hangs up.

“Nobody will believe that,” gasps Will.

“You’ll be shocked at what some people believe when it’s told to them by a trusted authority.”

“She doesn’t know you.”

“If she’s suspicious, which she won’t be, she’ll report the call to her manager, who will report to my superior, who will question me. And I will have your outpatient records lined up and ready to go. I’ve been writing down your progress since I came here.”

“You haven’t been at the hospital for days. You’ve been here.”

“I’m not a permanent resident. I got a few days off after the death of my nurse. It hit me so hard, you see.”

“Why the fuck were you writing down my progress if you were going to ask me to leave with you?”

“Habit. You’re sick, Will. Keeping notes on you is what any good doctor would do. And I wondered if a scenario like this might happen. I truly hoped it would not.”

A pause.

“You were awake.”

“The whole time. I heard you stir. I was hoping you would come to me if you had a nightmare.”

“You’re a liar.”

“I have only ever told you the truth.”

“That’s insane. You’re sick.” Will has tears down his cheeks, and his voice finally breaks. He can’t stop thinking about the tremble in his thumb as he pressed down on the nine. He can’t stop thinking about what he should have said to her. There has always been something wrong with him, he thinks. Lecter only showed him how deep that wrongness went.

He’s talking about himself as much as he is to Lecter. “You’re fucking sick, they’re going to help you, they’re going to institutionalize you, you’ll never hurt yourself ever again.”

“Oh, Will,” Lecter bends to the floor. “Is this the first time?” *First time for what?* Will wonders, but he can’t stop talking: to Lecter, to the girl, to himself.

“You poor horrible monster, you’re never going to hurt—”

Lecter wraps his arms around Will. Will pushes at his chest, turns his head away. He doesn’t know why he feels so afraid. So disgusted.

“I’m not that girl, Will. I’m safe. I’m here. I can take care of myself.”

Will shakes his head. Lecter switches tactics immediately.

“I can take care of you. Nobody needs to help us because we can do it ourselves. Nobody can fail you again because you can keep yourself safe now. You are allowed to be like this. It’s not wrong.”

Will shakes, pressed tightly against Lecter. The doctor is warm and comforting, and his voice is smooth. It’s calming. It feels right.

“Come away with me. We can go through life together. You’ll see, it’ll be beautiful. We can be beautiful together.”

Will thinks of a life spent in luxury, in satisfied curiosity, is a shared affection that might grow to love. He rests his head against Lecter’s chest, and the doctor's heart is a slow metronome compared to his own.

Will thinks of a life spent making paintings out of people. He cringes away.

Lecter looks stricken. “You have been taking meals with me for a while now. It’s nothing new to you. It is a good life, Will. I promise it. Come away with me. Walk on your own and join me.”

His voice is the dark ocean water that erases the line in the sand that Will drew for himself in his teens. All that’s left is a long beach, sea shells spotting the land beneath Will’s feet. Overhead, gray rain clouds. Will exhales, surprised, relieved. Nothing has happened. He toes the area where the line once was, crosses it. Nothing. Triumph. A lifetime of fear and carefulness, rendered unnecessary.

“I want to. But—” he whispers. He wants to say *but you helped me learn how to walk again, so I want you to take me there* . He thinks that would be a good thing to say. He knows Lecter likes it when things repeat themselves and come full circle.

He looks up at Lecter and meets the tender maroon eyes.

A tidal wave breaks over his head.

His eyes widen. No, not like this. He wants to go, he does, but he doesn’t know which side is which anymore. Will defines himself by that line in the sand, and it is gone. He’s treading water. “You fucking ruined me.”

Lecter’s eyes shutter. Another crash of water, and Will is drowning.

Will’s breath catches in his throat, he’s choking on saltwater, it’s too much. Lecter’s eyes, wrinkled at the sides, so many false smiles, so many true smiles, cold cold cold, the pleasure of watching a body slide from a knife, the comfort of a good meal, the resolve of killing someone he almost loved, he did love, the teeth at the bottom of the pot, the crying when he realized who it was, the numbness, the girl the girl the girl, that scream in the woods, she was crying and it was snowing it was so cold there was a fire and a pot over it and in that pot was her and her hand was hanging from the stretcher when they took the noose from her neck and he was standing on those rotting steps he was standing on those stone stairs he was both he was neither he was—

The man doesn’t know who he is. The man doesn’t know if he is holding or being held. The man wonders if he will fracture into pieces if more of him come into the room. The man mixes powder into water as a man watches him.

The man swallows a spicy liquid, and everything fades into dust and reflections.

Chapter 19

The wail of the ambulance is loud in Will's ears. His head lolls as the vehicle speeds down the road. The oxygen mask is tight against his face, and his eyes flicker open and shut, not really seeing anything. He can't move his arms. There is Hannibal, (his Hannibal!) there is Lecter (his Lecter!), there they both are, finally the same beautiful age, weaving in and out.

"You did this," he whispers. "*You.*" Both of you.

The expression on their faces is unbearable.

"My name is Doctor Hannibal Lecter. I am helping you," they say together.

"No. No."

"I am going to help you to the best of my ability," they say, merging. That's what Will had wanted. He doesn't want that anymore, he doesn't want to help or be helped, he wants to go, he wants to come away with him.

Hannibal Lecter grabs at his right hand, holding it tightly. His hand is cold and bony and steady. Will's entire world centers on that feeling, dense and enormous as a black hole. That soft weight, like so many times before. His entire body feels impossibly long, stretched in the most disconcerting way. His hand is miles away, his feet aren't even on the continent. His head, his aching head, has expanded. The grip on his hand never ebbs.

He is getting very very cold.

He is starting to get scared.

He realizes, in a confused way, that he doesn't want to die like this. Drugged and humiliated like a science experiment. He never wanted to be an experiment.

He is so tired.

His chest is tugging at him, his brain is wobbling around in his skull. He tries throwing up but only gags. He tries to wipe away the bile on his cheek but finds that he can't move his right hand. Why is that? He uses the left one.

Hannibal is next to him. Or is it Lecter?

He doesn't know.

"We are getting close to the hospital, Will. You must be strong."

Air catches in his mouth. He coughs again. A teacup cracks against marble.

"Hannibal," he breathes. It is barely audible. He is falling asleep. "Hannibal."

Phantom shards come back together.

It was as if the world had stopped. One Hannibal stares at him, his chest heaving. His eyes are wide, wild, shocked. Suddenly unsure. A cat whose mouse had looked at him and meowed. A lesson not to play with his food. A second chance. A benediction.

Hannibal.

If he had said it an hour earlier, Will knows that Hannibal would have escaped with him, breakdown or not. He would have taken Will with him. He would have done anything, everything, to get them away. They would have lived a jagged and somehow perfect life in Cuba, in Italy, in Lithuania.

But that Will and that Hannibal are somewhere else in the infinite universe. This Will was too proud and furious and scared to let himself go completely, this Hannibal is too stubborn and blind to read between the lines.

Will mourns the lost future, grips Hannibal's hand tight.

The ghost of a whole teacup haunts the air between them, the real porcelain under their feet cutting them bloody.

The doors slam open and the moment breaks. Will can only look up as two paramedics take his stretcher down, leaving his doctor behind him. The stars are out in the sky. They're faint and fuzzy. They seem so small. For a second, it's just him and the stars. Then, they roll into the emergency room and the pandemonium starts.

His clothes are cut off, a hospital gown put on, a needle pierces his arm. Someone puts a cap on him. The fluorescent lights are too much for his head. He whimpers in pain. Someone is stabbing his eyes, doctors aren't supposed to stab your eyes.

"Surgery?" he slurs, but apparently he was too quiet because nobody hears him. They roll him down the corridors. The ceiling tiles pass in a blur. The wheels squeak, the footsteps crack on the floor.

He doesn't understand why nobody is asking him for consent. He doesn't understand why nobody has noticed that he's conscious.

He starts thrashing when he gets into the operating room. Seizure, they say. They strap him down.

Will looks up, uncomprehending, until he sees Hannibal's eyes above a medical mask. He goes limp. A tear falls from his eye, unprompted. Fear and confusion before, and now clarity. Hard realization. The knowledge is sudden. He is going to die here. Not because he was weak, but because he was too inflexible, too common, too set in what society had told him to be. They couldn't be equals, not in this life.

He is done. This is defeat. He is 27. He will never be 28.

He doubts a stalemate would ever happen to them; he suspects a stalemate would manifest as them both dead. That would be most fair. Not going to happen now.

(Maybe in another life?)

Hannibal reaches to palpate his chest, leaning over. He stays there longer than necessary. *He's waiting* , Will thinks, *for me to say something.*

Will never thought of himself as somebody who would beg for his life. He thought of himself as stronger than that, somehow. But his emotions are other people's, and Hannibal looks sideways at him as though his heart was breaking instead of Will's. As if this is painful, unwanted, cruel, but a necessity, not just the result of a misunderstanding.

Someone accidentally turns on the OR speaker. Something classical. They turn down the volume, but it's there in the background. A victory march for Hannibal, a funeral march for him.

So he gives up, just a little. Just enough to bear the shame of begging.

"Hannibal, please." His whisper doesn't carry. His lips barely move. He doesn't really know what he's asking for. "I want to go. Please."

"I know you do."

Hannibal's voice is quiet.

"Then why?" Will's voice breaks.

"Because I have ruined you. You said it yourself."

There is no silence in the room, but Will feels as though the music has gone very far away. He sinks into the table. He won't meet Hannibal's eyes. He scrambles for something to say, anything. The only thing he can think of saying that might stop the doctor is I love you, which isn't even true, and anyway, he thinks that might rather die than say it.

He's already ruined. The drugs are the only thing that are giving him a little clarity.

His head is a fucking mess. He doesn't understand why he hasn't been put under yet. Why haven't they just pumped him full of anaesthesia and let him die peacefully?

He just wants to sleep. To let go. He wants to run. To fight. He's so tired.

He looks at the Hannibal on his left, turns to Hannibal, who is on his right. He wants that soft weight of a hand back in his.

"Oh, Will," says Hannibal (which one?), and pulls away.

Dying like this is the worst thing he can imagine. It's pathetic. There's no glory or reason in it. They'll call it an accident. The investigation will be quick. Maybe he'll even die on the

table naturally. There will be no justice for him. Hannibal Lecter will stop setting up tableaus once he's killed his muse, and the trail will go cold.

"Anaesthesia should be effective in ten seconds," someone says. Ten seconds to death. Will expects an adrenaline rush, but it's still the same exhaustion pressing against him.

Ten seconds. Less now. It's one last opportunity to do something. To say something that will get Hannibal caught because he can't resist doing what Will tells him. Will can't fight physically, not with the drugs and the straps pushing him down.

But he can fight another way. His mouth settles in a ghost of a smile. He catches Hannibal's eyes again.

"You can eat it, you charlatan." His last words. It sounds like an insult. It's an instruction.

He knows the doctor will listen.

Epilogue

“Why did you stop being a surgeon?” asks Miriam Lass, idling by the door, about to leave. She didn’t see the drawing of the wound man, he’s more careful than to leave that out, but she’s suspicious. After Will, Hannibal has become cautious, but Lass has good instincts. She would have made a fantastic asset to the FBI, he thinks. She might still get to, if she ignores her gut. But if she ignored her gut, she wouldn’t be a good agent. A little paradox. So he continues talking.

“I killed someone.” Hannibal can almost feel her synapses firing, can see the realization building; it’s electric against his temples. She’s so bright. It’s a shame, really. He considers the sentence, and what Lass’s subconscious already knows. “Or, more accurately, I couldn't save someone. But it felt like killing him.”

She reminds him of Will, a little. Not enough to stop what’s going to happen next.

“You were a cardiothoracic surgeon. It has to happen from time to time.” He can see the sweat bead at her hairline. Her breath is too even.

“One time too many. I had taken such pride in my surgery, my gift for him,” Hannibal softens, amused. He’s still a little in love, even after all this time. “And he had the gall to dismiss them all. His body rejected one, his soul the other, his mind the third. Such a rude man.”

“Them all? Was the surgery not the only gift?” She is reaching for her phone. She knows he can see her. They both pretend not to notice. Hannibal shifts his weight onto his toes.

“I gave him a new heart. And my own, too, just a few weeks after.”

“You were in love with a patient?” Her hand is in her pocket.

“I stole his heart literally, he stole mine metaphorically. When I saw it for the first time, that tightly folded valentine, I knew it was made for me.” His voice is low, coaxing, like she’s a scared animal.

“Did you eat it?” Her voice trembles a little on the third word, but her tone is hard and unyielding. He can hear her phone turn on, the tinny jingle she hadn’t bothered to put on mute beforehand.

Eat it, you charlatan.

He had. Then he had packed up his bags and moved back to Baltimore.

Hannibal smiles fondly. “I ate all his hearts. It would have been a sin not to.”

“Do you miss him?” The words are a whisper. Her last words are spent trying to unsettle him, to get him caught, just like Will’s.

“Always,” he whispers back. And lunges forward, just as she raises her state-issued firearm, which has been hidden in the bulk of her jacket. Somewhere, somehow, in a world with a cliff and a gladly eaten ortolan, Will Graham grins for no reason. He is probably streaked with blood. He is probably happy.

Miriam Lass, like Clarisse Starling after her, is the best marksman in her class. She practices every single day for a moment like this. She has racked up long hours in the training rooms. She doesn’t think about her movements. She lets reflex take over.

She does not miss.

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